Middlebrow Satire in the Works of P.G. Wodehouse, G.K. Chesterton and Nancy Mitford

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Dedicated with love to Chloe de Lullington

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INTRODUCTION: MIDDLEBROW SATIRE

In an episode of *Last Week Tonight* broadcast in November of 2019, popular television satirist John Oliver covered a legal dispute that had arisen between his show and mining magnate Robert Murray. Oliver had previously satirised Murray in an episode dedicated to the latter's shady business practices and complicity in mining disasters, leading to accusations of slander—and it is to this kind of baseless lawsuit that the episode under discussion is dedicated. Consequently, the episode has two interlocking preoccupations. Firstly, Oliver must deliver a satirical retort to Murray and extend the parameters of his censure to encompass this new manifestation of his target's unpleasantness. Secondly, given that his satire has placed Oliver in legal jeopardy, this episode is equally concerned with the question of defending satire. Given his status as a popular entertainer catering to a broad audience, reflecting on how Oliver achieves each of these goals provides a good starting point for exploring the satire that can be found in mid-century middlebrow writing.

Oliver concludes the piece, not with one of his customarily sardonic put-downs delivered from behind a desk, but with a long and extravagant musical number in which a huge range of bizarre accusations and insults are hurled towards Murray in an unquestionably satirical manner. Throughout the course of the song, we learn that:

> He went to the Louvre and spit in Mona Lisa's face
> Filled a rocket with puppies and he shot it into space
> He bludgeoned Nancy Kerrigan and watched her cry for fun
> He murdered Archduke Ferdinand and started World War One.[1]

Satire is notoriously difficult to define. For Charles Knight, any attempt at definition has to steer between the Scylla and Charybdis of impractical vagueness and narrow specificity.[2] Even so, the verse above fulfils the

[1] "SLAPP Suits", *LastWeekTonight*, accessed November 11, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UN8bJb8biZU.
[2] Charles Knight, *The Literature of Satire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1.

requisite conditions for satire in a number of different formulations of the concept. Kathryn Hume described an inclusive approach to "conceptualis[ing] satire and the satiric as a family defined by a bundle of features" whereby "no single feature need be present, just a substantial number of them."[3] Adopting that philosophy, it's not difficult to spot several such "features" at play here. If we opt for Abrams's and Harpham's description of "the literary art of diminishing or derogating a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking toward it attitudes of amusement, contempt, scorn, or indignation," we find such ridiculousness and amusement much in evidence.[4] Edward Rosenheim's "attack upon discernible, historically authentic particulars" is equally present, with particulars arising naturally from a song entitled 'Eat Shit, Bob'.[5] And the "playfully critical distortion" which Leonard Feinberg considers essential to the mode is very apparent in the bizarre accusations levelled above.[6]

But the lyrics are not, in themselves, sufficient in producing a truly effective and defensible form of satire. Northrop Frye, in his discussion of the mode, describes a spectrum bookended by two extremes—or "boundaries", to use Frye's term—at which satire vanishes. At one end we find the "the humour of pure gaiety" and, at the other, pure invective.[7] Ridiculous though these accusations may be, they would nevertheless take on the flavour of invective had they been delivered as a ranting monologue in Oliver's standard fashion. In order to function properly, these outspokenly silly notions must be delivered by adopting what Jonathan Greenberg would call a "mock form": the form, in this case, of a musical which imbues the satire with effervescent joy.[8] Joy and gaiety will be recurring preoccupations across this monograph: after all, as Frye notes,

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[3] Kathryn Hume, "Diffused Satire in Contemporary American Fiction" *Modern Philology.* Vol. 105, No. 2. (November 2007): 303. https://doi-org.ezproxyd.bham.ac.uk/10.1086/588102.

[4] M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 11th ed. (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2015), 352.

[5] Edward Rosenheim, *Swift and the Satirist's Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1963), 25.

[6] Leonard Feinberg, *The Satirist: His Temperament, Motivation, and Influence* (Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1963), 7.

[7] Northrop Frye, "The Nature of Satire" *University of Toronto Quarterly*, Vol. 14, No. 1, (October 1944): 76. https://muse-jhu-edu.ezproxyd.bham.ac.uk/article/551010/pdf.

[8] Jonathan Greenberg, *The Cambridge Introduction to Satire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 38.

"too much hatred and too little gaiety will upset the balance of tone."[9] This notion of a satire which achieves that delicate balance of censorious mockery and playful exuberance—refusing to succumb to the ineffectuality of unpalatable aggression—will reappear across the coming chapters.

Throughout the course of the song, Oliver himself delights in explaining why he has elected to attack Murray through such frivolous, insubstantial, or silly means. As he notes: "if we discuss Bob Murray in a way no reasonable person could construe as factual, we can say whatever the fuck we like!".[10] In short, Oliver's satire is protected—in a legal sense—through a kind of frivolity which has been cause enough to disqualify several middlebrow authors as satirists of any sort. At the same time, the risk of descending into the realm of unfunny, unpersuasive invective—a natural corollary to this kind of exaggeration—is deftly sidestepped through an infusion of pleasant, genial musicality. This is not to say that such geniality tempers or tones down the satire, however. Frye has persuasively suggested that satire's potency lies, counter-intuitively, in acts of diminishment rather than expansive derogation. Describing Tom Moor's satirical comparison between Viscount Castlereagh and a pump, Frye comments that

> [t]hat does it exactly. It is rather flattering to one's ego to be called a wolf or a scorpion; there is a certain thrill in being thought a dark and terrible emissary of the demonic powers. But nobody likes to be called a pump, at any rate not with so much enthusiasm.[11]

Though Oliver's satire is rooted in the serious matter of mining-related deaths, Frye would surely argue that denouncing Murray as evil is less likely to bring about the shame and humiliation satire can provoke than Oliver's strategy of cheerfully alleging that he "masturbates to *Schindler's List*." In short: frivolous, light, or irreverent satire like this song is better able to access the "loss of dignity" satiric attack engenders. This is a process which some criticism has characterised as "shameful and painful".[12] As such, Frye's comment allows us to rethink some 'light' works of literary satire which have been brushed aside as minor or fringe examples of the mode, recasting them as instances of satire that are better able to bring about harm.

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[9] Frye, "Nature," 76.
[10] Oliver, "SLAPP Suits".
[11] Frye, "The Nature of Satire" 77.
[12] Gilisende Kuipers, "Satire and Dignity" in *The Power of Satire*, eds. Marijke Meijer Drees and Sonja de Leeuw (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2015), 20.

The satirical principles that underpin Oliver's song are present in literature of the twentieth century and, in particular, in works whose style can be understood as middlebrow: "neither unapologetically elitist, nor intractably vulgar."[13] The purpose of this monograph is to describe the manifestations of satire in select middlebrow works, arguing in favour of both the presence and significance of satire in early-to-mid-century middlebrow comic writing which is characterised by frivolity and delight. By extension, I go on to suggest that such satire—like Oliver's—has the capacity to act both as an effective means of attack and as a potent form of defence. Existing studies of satire of this period focus too narrowly on affectively unpalatable or overtly visionary satire in the works of aloof modernists and grim dystopian writers like Wyndham Lewis, Evelyn Waugh, Aldous Huxley, and George Orwell. Focus is often drawn to those works which adhere to understandings of satire predicated on "negative emotions such as anger, indignation, disgust, sadism, contempt, and aloofness."[14] This preoccupation with aggression and indifference as the most significant affective possibilities for satire is ultimately self-defeating. My goal, by contrast, is to continue the valuable work of scholarship of the middlebrow by casting pleasant and ostensibly insubstantial works in a new light. In so doing, I highlight the under-emphasised significance of "jovial" strains of satire in the early-to-mid twentieth century.[15] I deliberately explore works which are notable for what Erica Brown has called the "delight, pleasure, and charm" of comic middlebrow literature, accentuating writers with a large degree of influence and an enduring popularity.[16] The latter underscores the potential for harm that such satire, if efficacious, might bring about. By drawing together satire and the middlebrow through discussions of P.G. Wodehouse, G.K. Chesterton, and Nancy Mitford, I aim to demonstrate that satire isn't as impotent as scholars so often make it out to be.

Satire: Scorn and Pity

One of the most important works on satire of the early-to-mid twentieth century is Jonathan Greenberg's *Modernism, Satire and the Novel* (2011).

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[13] Clive E. Hill, "The Evolution of the Masculine Middlebrow: Gissing, Bennett and Priestley" in *The Masculine Middlebrow, 1880-1950: What Mr Miniver Read*, ed. Kate Macdonald (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 38.
[14] Greenberg, *Introduction*, 21.
[15] Greenberg, *Introduction*, 21.
[16] Erica Brown, *Comedy and the Feminine Middlebrow Novel* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2013), 1.

For Greenberg, satire is central to modernism (rarely spoken of simply because its presence "goes without saying"[17]), and he puts forward his understanding of the mode as follows: "Satire […] is a contradictory phenomenon in which its purported moralism or conservatism is conjoined with sadistic or anarchic desires, so that satire often in the end describes its own collapse or undoing."[18] This collapse is the product of what Greenberg calls satire's "double movement", a phenomenon whereby "on the one hand, the satirist speaks for a community […] ridiculing his target in order to urge reform; on the other, he is a renegade who enjoys the subversion of traditional values, delights in his own aesthetic powers, even savours the cruelty he inflicts."[19] Greenberg is correct, of course, to note that satire isn't necessarily moral, and that its claims to virtuous motives can be understood as nothing more than pretension. However, Greenberg's engagement with modernist writers of the 1930s—or "late modernism"[20]—reveals a fundamental drawback to addressing the contradictions inherent in satire's double movement.

As far as Greenberg is concerned, some of the most important satire to explore in the modernist period is that which is openly— "defiant[ly]"— cruel, unpleasant aggressive, or aloof.[21] Moreover, this exploration reveals not only that such satire is fundamentally self-destructive, but that certain late modernist satirists go out of their way to depict or dramatise the "self-undoing"[22] of their satire, or else cannot escape the contradictions that undo their claims to moral authority.[23] This is a vision of satire broadcasting its own inefficacy in a critical approach that accentuates the mode's "failures and contradictions."[24]

In the history of satire scholarship, there has often been resistance to the notion that satire is actually capable of bringing about the kinds of tangible, efficacious results to which the mode often lays claim, whether that be to

[17] Jonathan Greenberg, *Modernism, Satire, and the Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 2.
[18] Greenberg, *Modernism,* xiv.
[19] Greenberg, *Modernism*, 7.
[20] Greenberg, *Modernism*, xiv.
[21] Greenberg, *Modernism,* 46.
[22] Greenberg, *Modernism,* 46.
[23] Greenberg, *Modernism*, 53.
[24] Greenberg, *Modernism*, 46.

"chasten, chastise, reform", or "warn".[25] Brian Connery and Kirk Combe have noted that the New Critics naturally resisted the intentionality implicit in satiric attack. This led to understandings of satire like those of Robert C. Elliott, in which satire becomes "worthy of critical analysis" only at the moment in which "belief in its efficacy is extinguished."[26] In more recent times, literary-critical approaches to satire have found new ways to refute satire's claims to efficacy, especially through what Nicholas Hudson has described as an 'open' approach to satire. Critics who follow this line of thought insist upon the mode as "a basically unstable rhetoric of provocation and inquiry",[27] rejecting its "normative or persuasive function[s]".[28] It is to this school, in some respects, that Greenberg's work on 1930s satirists belongs, given his emphasis on the instability of the satirist's moral position and their embrace of "paradoxes and problems".[29] Open approaches to satire can brush away the possibility that satire is capable of attacking concrete targets in a persuasive manner, and this approach, as Hudson notes, is potentially inapplicable in a twentieth-century context:

> [S]atire certainly *can* be historically specific and normative, having definite external targets and reforming purposes—what I here define as *closed.* And it may come as some surprise that this kind of satire became more common in the twentieth century, an age that, in the common view, tended to disrupt the moral certitudes of previous eras.[30]

There is a case to be made, then, for the existence of a variety of twentieth century satire predicated on reform and concreteness, allowing us to reconsider the notion of satiric efficacy. To my mind, this is particularly worth doing in the context of satiric bigotry; that is, bigotry expressed through the techniques of satire. To argue that satire is incapable of persuasion, or that it undoes itself through paradox, or that it's "more

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[25] Brian A. Connery and Kirk Combe, "Theorising Satire: A Retrospective and Introduction" in *Theorising Satire: Essays in Literary Criticism* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1995), 5.
[26] Connery and Combe, "Theorising Satire," 5.
[27] Marijke Meijer Drees and Sonja de Leeuw, "Introduction" in *The Power of Satire,* eds. Marijke Meijer Drees and Sonja de Leeuw (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2015), 3.
[28] Nicholas Hudson, "'Open' and 'Closed' Satire: Levels of Indeterminacy in Satiric Texts" in *Teaching Modern British and American Satire* eds. Evan R. Davis and Nicholas D. Nace) New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2019), 38
[29] Greenberg, *Modernism*, 46.
[30] Hudson, "Levels of Indeterminacy," 38.

inclined to ask questions than to provide answers," is essentially to leave unaddressed the bigotries that satire is capable of propagating.[31] Such criticism might even be said to function as an extension of the satiric apologia. It muddies the waters of what should be considered straightforward satiric censure by instead choosing to claim that such acts are, in fact, ironic and ambiguous explorations of a given topic, or that such attacks are simply susceptible to "self-undoing".[32] In order to fully articulate the urgency and stakes inherent in taking a 'closed' approach to a middlebrow strain of satire, we shall observe the presence of such unpalatable positions as the antisemitism detectable in the works of Chesterton and the misogyny present in the works of Wodehouse. Rather than viewing these satiric positions as frivolously borderline examples of a mode whose persuasiveness is nullified by its contradictions, the aim is to look at these qualities as aspects of popular, influential writing with at least the potential to bring about lasting harm. As Robert Phiddian argues, we should not brush aside the bigoted, prejudiced, or fascistic aspects of twentieth-century satire simply because they are too overt to be worthy of what he calls "academic complexity-hunting."[33] Instead, we should "account for the power of satire which runs with unpleasant political and ideological views" and, in conjunction, "account for how that power can be harnessed" in harmful ways.[34]

Situating middlebrow literature within the history of satire offers us one way to account for that harm. The middlebrow has been derogatorily viewed as insubstantial and undemanding, but capable of providing pleasure—what Virginia Woolf called a "mixture of geniality and sentiment stuck together with a sticky slime of calf's-foot jelly."[35] What Woolf describes is, in fact, a recipe for palatable, and therefore persuasive, satire. For many scholars, as we have seen, satire is best understood in affective terms: various unpalatable affects such as aggression and indifference are cited as characteristic of the mode, whether in terms of a 'hot' Juvenalian outrage

[31] Dustin Griffin, *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2994), 5.
[32] Fredric V. Bogel, *The Difference Satire Makes* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2001), 62.
[33] Robert Phiddian, "Satire and the Limits of Literary Theories." *The Critical Quarterly* Vol. 55, No. 3 (2013): 52.
[34] Phiddian, "Limits", 54.
[35] Virginia Woolf, "Middlebrow" in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1974), 182.

or, alternatively, a "lower emotional temperature"[36] that engenders "cruelty".[37] There is, however, an alternative understanding of satire which places sympathy—which Greenberg describes as "decidedly unsatiric"[38]—at the heart of the satirical enterprise, and it is through this prism that middlebrow satire's place can be better understood.

According to Aaron Matz, sympathy was an important aspect of late nineteenth-century realist satire, which acted to condemn the gritty social realities of the late nineteenth century while simultaneously offering up sympathy towards its victims. In Flaubert, "mockery and empathy are compatible", while, in Conrad, "pity and contempt, scorn and pity" come together to form a "strange cohesion".[39] This conception of the mode isn't a million miles away from Chesterton's description of an honourable satirist: one whose censure involves "pitying the sinner and respecting the man even while he satirises both."[40] It's no surprise that middlebrow writers like Chesterton (and my other subjects) might exhibit satirical tendencies that align with Matz's observations: as John Baxendale notes, middlebrow writers inherited aspects of Victorian aesthetics.[41] That's not to say that Wodehouse, Chesterton, and Mitford should be considered strictly realist satirists. Matz does point out that 1930s England saw plenty of high-profile satire characterised by a "retreat from verisimilitude," often in the form of farce and caricature, and my subjects fall broadly into this category.[42] However, in making that point, Matz turns to Wyndham Lewis and Evelyn Waugh: figures that could hardly be described as writers who paired their satire with pity or sympathy. Like Greenberg, we're returned to the unpalatable satirists of late modernism. By contrast, what Woolf would call our genial and delightful middlebrow subjects might be considered inheritors of the sympathetic aspects of their Victorian forebears' censure.

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[36] Hume, "Diffused," 305.
[37] Greenberg, *Introduction*, 162.
[38] Greenberg, *Modernism,* 78.
[39] Aaron Matz, *Satire in an Age of Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 172.
[40] G.K. Chesterton, *Varied Types* in *G.K. Chesterton Ultimate Collection.* (Prague: e-artnow, 2019), 5750. Kindle.
[41] John Baxendale, *Priestley's England: J.B. Priestley and English Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 14-15.
[42] Matz, *Realism*, 175.

In turn, this allows us to better understand how middlebrow satirists are able to "reprove vices with a moralising objective" while remaining palatable.[43]

Matz isn't the first commentator to draw lines of association between satire and sympathy. James Sutherland, for example, sees "mingled sympathy and satire" in his discussion of satire and the novel.[44] Leonard Feinberg, in his study of various perceptions of satire and the satirist across time, goes one further and describes a means of reconciling the apparent contradictions between sympathy and satire. Feinberg mentions that while aloofness and detachment represent a standard account of the mode, there are significant deviations:

> Far from agreeing that the satirist needs detachment, Gilbert Cannan insists that the satirist 'must love his material before he can begin to work on it.' He is convinced that 'Satire […] cannot thrive where no love is. Its energy is the energy of love repressed and denied its sustenance, and it cries havoc upon all love's enemies.' Humbert Wolfe is another strong advocate of the 'sympathy' theory: 'The satirist must have love in his heart for all that is threatened by the objects of his satire.'[45]

This understanding of satire is entirely compatible with Matz's diagnosis of empathy and pity as key aspects of realist satire. In fact, Wolfe's description of sympathetic satire allows us to understand the place of sympathy in middlebrow satire. All three of my middlebrow subjects—Chesterton, Wodehouse, and Mitford—employ satire in conjunction with their "delight, pleasure, and charm",[46] stripping their satire of its transgressive sting without sacrificing its potency. Chesterton, that master of paradox, has no difficulty reconciling the potential transgression of satire with the charms associated with middlebrow literature: he is known for his "willingness to delight when he is being most serious."[47] Wodehouse, meanwhile, is quite able to follow in the footsteps of the formulation observed by Feinberg: he offers us satiric objects which threaten the nostalgic pleasantness which his charms bring into being. Women in Wodehouse, for example, threaten what Jeeves refers to as the "cosy bachelor establishment" so beloved by readers

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[43] Alberta Gatti, "Satire of the Spanish Golden Age" in *A Companion to Satire* ed. Ruben Quintero (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2007), 90.
[44] James Sutherland, *English Satire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 19670), 121.
[45] Feinberg, *Satirist*, 175-6.
[46] Brown, *Comedy*, 1.
[47] Michael D. Hurley, *G.K. Chesterton* (Tavistock: Northcote House Publishers, 2012), 11.

of Bertie Wooster's stories. This is a device which sanctions Wodehouse's satire against women while establishing sympathy towards the innocent, beleaguered Bertie as the dominant tone, as opposed to more unpalatable, aggressive strains of satiric attack.[48]

This notion of a sanctioned form of attack brings us to the crux of middlebrow satire's implications. The present work is not merely concerned with locating satire's presence in the context of the middlebrow. After all, when you're armed with a sufficiently inclusive set of definitions and prepared to accept satire's status as a mode, a mood, or an "attitude," satire can be found in any text one wishes.[49] Rather, my aim is to suggest that middlebrow satire holds the potential to be persuasive— to enact the kinds of reforms or changes to which satire has long held claim. While we can't easily determine the influence of such satire—it would be difficult, for example, to measure a rise in misogyny in response to Wodehouse's satirical depiction of women—it is blasé to assume that no such persuasive power exists in satire. Instead, this study functions as a form of thought-experiment centred around the concept of the satiric apologia and its credibility. Satirists often attempt to defend their transgressions by depicting themselves and their art in a flatteringly moral light. Methods for disseminating satire's moral pretensions include the kind of self-fashioning detailed in the below passage, to which we shall return occasionally, from Robert C. Elliott:

> The *apologiae* are remarkably similar in their protestations […] from them we get an ideal image which the satirist projects of himself and his art. According to the image the satirist is a public servant fighting the good fight against vice and folly wherever he meets it; he is honest, brave, protected by the rectitude of his motives; he attacks only the wicked and then seldom or never by name; he is, in short, a moral man appalled by the evil he sees around him, and he is forced by his conscience to write satire.[50]

Of course, this ideal image of the satirist is greatly exaggerated. P.K. Elkin offers a similar summation of this image in his important study *The Augustan Defence of Satire* (1973), in which he notes that:

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[48] P.G. Wodehouse, "Bertie Changes His Mind" in *The World of Jeeves* (London: Arrow Books, 2008), 693.
[49] Naomi Milthorpe, *Evelyn Waugh's Satires: Texts and Contexts* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2016), 3.
[50] Robert C. Elliott, *The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), 265.

> Either from conviction, or for reasons of expediency, […] satirists preferred to present themselves to the public as practical reformers. Their claims were frequently grandiose. Satire, they declared, is on the side of the angels, of the king and the state. It is the public conscience, an arm of government and the law, the destroyer of vice and the champion of virtue. Did it not come into being for the express purpose of uplifting mankind?[51]

Elkin suggests that such exaggerations were a necessary counterweight to the accusations of unpleasantness levelled against the eighteenth-century satirist, and as such were not meant to be taken literally. As this project progresses, however, we will begin to see glimpses of the great paragon of virtue presented to us in the above passages, an image refracted through middlebrow frivolity and applied to the writerly subjects of this study. The notion that the middlebrow inherited aspects of a sympathetic strain of satire helps us to understand why this may be.

Elkin tells us that there were many defences of satire in the eighteenth century beyond an open appeal to moral rectitude and a depiction of the satirist as a kind of saintly knight errant. And, given that twentieth-century satirists often did look back to their Augustan forebears, it's worth considering how such defences might apply to middlebrow works.[52] Elkin reminds us that many of these canonical figures preferred to depict themselves, not only as avenging prophets of fire and brimstone but, rather, as "light-hearted fellow[s]" notable for their "smiling satire": "They felt that smiling satire instructs and reforms more effectively than savage satire because it pleases more readily. It wins more friends and influences more people." This is a plausible, common-sense approach to envisioning a strain of genuinely persuasive satire which is not reliant on aggression and detachment. In the same vein, Elkin cites Joseph Addison's remark that sharp, biting satire is counter-productive: "The first goal of any writer", he says, "as for that matter any member of society, should be to gain the goodwill of his readers." In short: the sympathetic approach of an apparently silly and frivolous form of satire can be understood as an extension of "smiling satire":

> This was the new ideal of satire—or rather the old Horatian ideal of *utile dulci* in new words—and it was propounded not only by the essayists, Addison and Steele, and by playwrights from Congreve to Sheridan, but

[51] P.K. Elkin, *The Augustan Defence of Satire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 88.
[52] Valentine Cunningham, "Twentieth Century Fictional Satire" in *A Companion to Satire* ed. Ruben Quintero. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2007), 403.

> also by practically every satirical poet and critic of satire from Dryden to Johnson. It is fundamental to Dryden's *Discourse* […] it states authoritatively, for the first time in English, the neo-classic ideal of satire as mocking rather than abusive, and artfully oblique, and gentle rather than blunt and punitive.[53]

This is a vision, ultimately, of a form of satire which is at once persuasive and potent. Crucially, it demands as its prerequisites the precise qualities which comic middlebrow writers not only possess in abundance but which, remarkably, often disqualify these figures as satirists. To current scholars of the mode, P.G. Wodehouse operates, at best, on the "borders" of satire,[54] presumably as a result of what Richard Voorhees calls his "lack of spite"—yet that same lack has, as Voorhees notes, "won him so many readers."[55] Erica Brown's description of middlebrow literature's "delight, pleasure, and charm", take on a new urgency when paired with smiling satire. As James Sutherland suggests, Addison's "good-natured" approach to satire, alongside that of Richard Steele, succeeded greatly in "laughing men out of their follies": they are, in terms of "results", the most successful satirists in English literature.[56] And while, for Elkin, the Augustans often fell short of this standard, it is plausible to consider the idea that light, sympathetic, middlebrow literature is capable of succeeding in presenting a kind of satire simultaneously palatable and persuasive. This is a satiric practice which, by extension, affords its wielders the opportunity to depict themselves in a morally upstanding light without fear of contradiction.

The Middlebrow: Delight, Pleasure, and Charm

What Woolf called the middlebrow's "mixture of geniality and sentiment" is clearly compatible with a satirical tradition marked by "an air of geniality and warm humanity."[57] Like John Oliver's cheerful, joyous musical number, comic middlebrow writing can express satire with enough of a glint in its eye to ward off the excesses of unpalatable invective. This is not to say that all middlebrow works must be understood as satirical, but, rather, that they can provide a suitable vehicle for palatable, persuasive satire. This understanding is enhanced by an awareness of middlebrow literature's

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[53] Elkin, *Augustan*, 151.
[54] Greenberg, *Introduction*, 172.
[55] Richard J. Voorhees, *P.G. Wodehouse* (New York: Twayne Publishing, 1966), 8.
[56] Sutherland, *English Satire*, 100.
[57] David Worcester, *The Art of Satire* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1969), 46.

context. In particular, its adoption of the sympathy inherent in the satire of its late Victorian predecessors combined with opposition to its affectively distasteful modernist counterparts cements the idea that palatable satire finds a home in middlebrow writing. For Clive E. Hill, in fact, the middlebrow is largely predicated on satire—in particular, on its satire of the highbrow.[58] Fredric Bogel asserts that a great deal of satire comes of policing the "boundar[ies]" between the satirist and a target which they resemble or to which they exist in proximation.[59] It follows, then, that the "betwixt and between" nature of the middlebrow naturally lends itself to satire's boundary-policing, as it must distinguish itself as a cut above lowbrow literature while remaining distinct from the highbrow.[60] Indeed, for Baxendale, the battle of the brows that represented the animosity between middlebrow and highbrow was couched in moral terms very much applicable to satire's own moral pretensions. As Baxendale notes, the battle of the brows can be understood as a morally charged debate, in which middlebrow writers like Priestley accused their highbrow counterparts of a "cultural betrayal": to them, highbrow writers responded to the idea of a new, democratic, inclusive kind of literature and culture by retreating further into their ivory towers of haughty aloofness.[61] Satire is, in short, embedded within the middlebrow, and the middlebrow's geniality and charm lend themselves to both the production and (crucially) the defence of satire.

Before outlining the specific techniques that middlebrow satire uses to defend itself, it is worth considering the animating force behind that defence. Why, for middlebrow writers in particular, is it so important to sidestep satire's self-defeating contradictions and general unpalatability? As we've seen in our present-day example, John Oliver has a specific and concrete need to defend himself: his use of deliberately silly, hyperbolic claims is necessary in order to protect his satire in a legal sense. Such nonsense falls under the purview of protected speech, a legal mechanism through which he can avoid the accusations of slander which occurred, ironically, when speaking candidly about his target on a previous occasion. Throughout history, the satirist has faced various comparable threats, if not along litigious lines, then through the dangers of ostracization, imprisonment, banishment, or even death, which have at various points been a real danger for those of a satirical inclination. As we shall discover,

[58] Hill, "Evolution," 39.
[59] Bogel, *Difference,* 127.
[60] Woolf, *Moth*, 180.
[61] Baxendale, *Priestley's England*, 17.

Mitford's popular biography of Voltaire is largely propelled forwards through its depiction of Voltaire fleeing from vengeful governments due to his satire.

I use the case of John Oliver only as an analogy, of course: present-day American legal norms probably didn't have much of a bearing on Nancy Mitford's life or work. I'm not concerned so much with the legality of satire as with the broader sense that satirists must defend themselves and ensure that their audience remains on their side. The case of Oliver's Bob Murray song is strikingly pertinent in that its cheerful frivolity resonates with the kind of genial satire which, as I have suggested, represents a form of defence unavailable to overtly unpleasant practitioners of the mode. What, then, are the risks that my satirist-subjects undertake if they're not legal in nature? In the case of popular, middlebrow literature, the potential repercussions of satirical transgression take on a financial form. Middlebrow literature is, at heart, commercial in nature, and as such it must keep in the forefront of its collective mind what Ann-Marie Einhaus has called "commercial viability".[62] My three subjects—Wodehouse, Chesterton, and Mitford—were selected for the present work due, in part, to the financial pressures which formed a backdrop for their writing. Mitford's status as an impoverished aristocrat saw her move from the magnificent country houses of her youth to working part-time in a bookshop before she met true commercial success with *The Pursuit of Love* (1945). Chesterton, cerebral and impractical though he's sometimes considered, required urgent influxes of money throughout his life, first in order to marry his wife, Frances, and later in order to sustain his own unprofitable periodical. The young Wodehouse, when released from Dulwich College, faced a ticking time-bomb in his pursuit of literary success: his father arranged for him to work in a bank specifically designed to train up bankers before, after a year or two, shipping them off to colonial branches from which a life of dreary clerkship was inescapable.

These commercial exigencies represent the backdrop of my subjects' satire. As James L.W. West III notes of literature since 1900, "[t]he marketplace was only one of several factors that influenced the literary work, of course, and sometimes it was only a minor factor, but it was never absent from the author's thoughts if that author proposed to earn a living by writing. Commercial factors often influenced the published form of the

[62] Ann-Marie Einhaus, "Know Your Audience: Middlebrow Aesthetic and Literary Positioning in the Fiction of P.G. Wodehouse", in *Middlebrow Wodehouse: P.G. Wodehouse's Work in Context,* ed. Ann Rea (Oxon: Routledge, 2016), 25. Kindle.

work, and its success, more than the author realised."[63] Although English satirists of the twentieth century didn't necessarily need to fear death or imprisonment for their censure, any satirical transgression or unpleasantness represented what West might consider a "limitation" imposed on them "by the markets to which they sold their work. These limitations influenced virtually everything with which authors had to concern themselves—subject matter, tone, language, content, characterisation, length, balance between narration and dialogue—all features that might affect the publishability or subsequent salability of an item."[64] This throws into sharp relief Worcester's comments on the "necessity", for the satirist, "of winning the reader's sympathy."[65] At stake, when this principle is applied to the sales-dependent middlebrow satirist, is nothing less than their very means of survival.

Obviously, such concerns are not foregrounded in discussions of satirists who are less commercially driven. Naturally, one feels, the likes of Wyndham Lewis were happy to sometimes rebut satire's traditional claims to moral rectitude: he and writers like him were not necessarily motivated by the bestselling status hand-delivered by such figures as "Mr. Wodehouse's ghastly butler."[66] Einhaus puts this contrast of commercial perspectives between middlebrow and highbrow rather neatly. She notes that where, for Virginia Woolf, money and a room of one's own are necessary prerequisites for writing, for the likes of Wodehouse, writing is *how* one acquires such money and space.[67] In short: satire's transgressive, unpalatable qualities represent a financial threat to the middlebrow satirist. Any enduring popularity of, and affection for, the satirists I explore in this study demonstrates that such unpalatability can be successfully overcome. In short: middlebrow satire's urgent need for commercial viability allows us to consider the possibility that these satirists might be truly capable of defending their censure. Middlebrow satire has both the means and motive to curtail any disturbing effect that satiric transgression may have on its readers, allowing writers like my subjects to ascend to new apologetic heights.

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[63] James L.W. West III, *American Authors and the Literary Marketplace Since 1900* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1990), 1.
[64] West, *American Authors*, 4.
[65] Worcester, *The Art of Satire*, 14.
[66] Wyndham Lewis, *Rude Assignment: An Intellectual Autobiography* (Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1984), 17.
[67] Einhaus, "Know Your Audience," 23.

Scholarship of middlebrow literature has noted—whether in passing or, occasionally, as part of a sustained discussion—that such works can contain unsettling elements that don't contradict or compromise their pleasant, affirming qualities. As Christoph Ehland and Cornelia Wächter note,

> Even though middlebrow fiction usually adheres to conspicuously affirmative structures of plot development in order to meet genre expectations and publishers' requirements, the narratives are often in a disintegrative state in form and subject. They raise disturbing issues concerning the crumbling Empire, collapsing class structures and the deterioration of the Victorian family ideal and contribute largely to the deconstruction and redefinition of gender roles and ideals. In this sense, middlebrow writing can be regarded as a domestication of modernist themes. It is a form of *anxiety management* that allows unsettling issues to be raised while maintaining at least a superficial impression of narrative stability and security.[68]

In sum: middlebrow literature can engage in "disturbing" acts and raise "unsettling" issues while still "maintaining" a sense of security. I think we can couch satire in precisely these terms. Satiric censure is often considered inherently transgressive, and scholars sometimes describe readerly responses to satire in strikingly similar terms to those used in the above passage. Readers, it has been noted, "are made uneasy by the spectacle of the satirist sitting in judgment."[69]

By reflecting on the presence of satire in middlebrow texts, then, it quickly becomes clear that the mode's unpalatability needn't be considered overpowering. To Greenberg, as we've seen, satire "is a contradictory phenomenon in which its purported moralism or conservatism is conjoined with sadistic or anarchic desires, so that satire often in the end describes its own collapse or undoing."[70] Yet middlebrow works, in the words of Faye Hammill, "often achieve a delicate blending of such apparently incompatible ingredients as sentiment and sophistication, optimism and disillusionment, frivolity and engagement, conservatism and subversion."[71] This is a common theme of scholarship of the middlebrow and its "paradoxical allegiance" to

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[68] Christopher Ehland and Cornelia Wächter, "Introduction: '…All Granite and Female Fiction'" in *Middlebrow and Gender 1890-1945*, eds. Ehland and Wächter (Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2016), 2-3.
[69] Fredric V. Bogel, "The Difference Satire Makes" in in *Theorising Satire: Essays in Literary Criticism*, ed. Brian A. Connery and Kirk Combe (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 44.
[70] Greenberg, *Modernism,* xiv.
[71] Faye Hammill, *Sophistication* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), 120.

contradictory topics and ideas.[72] If middlebrow works are capable of "maintaining" or "managing" the kind of contradictions that underpin satire's double movement, then it follows that middlebrow satire isn't necessarily subject to what Greenberg calls "self-undoing." At the same time, middlebrow satire's mingled sympathy, gaiety, and charm may cause us to rethink the idea that such satire's "aggression unbalances its ethical claims."[73] Rather than thinking of satire in terms of "collapse", we can instead think of the mode—when housed in middlebrow literature—as stable.[74] Middlebrow anxiety management, then, can be understood as an apologetic strategy: as a means of engaging in satiric censure while sidestepping readerly unease or discomfort, as the transgressions of the mode are countered by "affirmative" or reassuring qualities—including, to extend an example I used in the previous section, the geniality and sympathy that define "smiling satire." Thus, as Louise Macdonald might put it, the middlebrow satirist is capable of subversively satirising their object while "satisfying the conservatism of the middlebrow market."[75]

Let us consider a specific example of anxiety management yoked into the service of the satiric apologia. A crucial aspect of the affirmation under discussion takes the form, as Ehland and Wächter note, of plot structures and generic characteristics. The middlebrow is comprised to no small degree of various forms of genre fiction: romance, detective, historical, and other popular genre fictions can be found in middlebrow literature.[76] Satire, meanwhile, finds itself very much at home within various genres: Brian Connery and Kirk Combe describe the mode as a parasitic inhabitant of other genres,[77] while Greenberg's *Cambridge Introduction* to the subject describes satire as taking on mock forms, not merely to parody or mock the forms themselves, but as a platform from which to launch attacks on other targets.[78]

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[72] Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 3.
[73] Naomi Milthorpe, *Evelyn Waugh's Satires: Texts and Contexts* (Vancouver: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2016), 4.
[74] Greenberg, *Modernism,* 46.
[75] Louise McDonald, "Clemence Dane's Fantastical Fiction and Feminist Consciousness" in *Middlebrow and Gender 1890-1945*, eds. Ehland and Wächter (Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2016), 186.
[76] Hill, "Evolution," 38.
[77] Connery and Combe, "Theorising Satire," 5.
[78] Greenberg, *Introduction*, 38-9.

Throughout this monograph, we shall consider the points of compatibility between satirical jibes and genres like romance and detective fiction. We shall also examine how the characteristics of these genres allow them to act as a form of apologetic anxiety management, allowing the satire all the more potency for its ostensible reassurances. In a chapter on G.K. Chesterton, for example, we shall examine how Father Brown embodies the figure of the satirist. His status as a detective who stops criminals by thinking as they do simultaneously raises the spectre of satire's worrying contradictions and quells any troublingly transgressive implications this idea might hold. Chesterton does this, at least in part, through the employment of what Ehland and Wächter might call "conspicuously affirmative […] genre expectations": the use of detective fiction's reassuring returns to stability, order, and the cosy satisfaction of a case closed. We can also see the value of taking on the forms of other genres in our opening example of John Oliver's song. Oliver's ludicrous accusations hold satirical weight due to a combination of both the ridiculousness of his claims and the reassuringly cheery musical number through which he expresses them. Without the generic characteristics of the musical managing the unpalatable attacks of the satire itself, the result would have been an aggressive and unpleasant diatribe and would thereby fail to qualify as a persuasive or efficacious method of censure.

Middlebrow literature's ability to influence or persuade readers forms the heart of its potential for efficacious satire. And, as I have mentioned, attending to instances of satiric bigotry imbues that persuasive potential with stakes and urgency while allowing us to both recognise the value of, and look beyond, middlebrow charm. It is important, at this point, to separate the troubling potential of middlebrow satire with past and present scholarly attitudes towards middlebrow literature, navigating the twin poles of derision and deference. As Kate Macdonald has noted, scholarship of the middlebrow allows us to "reclaim" derogated forms of literature and re-evaluate them with a restored sense of respect.[79] Dismissive attitudes towards the middlebrow continue to exist in the present day,[80] and I'm just as interested as any scholar of the middlebrow in establishing and reaffirming

[79] Kate Macdonald, "Introduction: Identifying the Middlebrow, the Masculine and Mr Miniver" in *The Masculine Middlebrow 1890-1950: What Mr Miniver Read* ed. Kate Macdonald (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 11.

[80] Janet Galligani Casey, "Middlebrow Reading and Undergraduate Teaching: The Place of the Middlebrow in the Academy" in *Middlebrow Literary Cultures: The Battle of the Brows 1920-1960*, ed. Grover and Brown (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), 25.

middlebrow literature as a valid and significant object of study.[81] However, it is important not to conflate either a respect for the subject or an accentuation of middlebrow pleasure with uncomplicated praise.

In a sense, one could argue that middlebrow scholarship as a whole is animated by the spirit of apology (in its formal sense of 'defence') due to a necessary and understandable need to justify working with a literary form which has been, and continues to be, derogated. Part of the reason that I have elected to pay attention to instances of bigotry expressed through satiric means across this monograph is because I want to prevent my work from becoming an extension of the satiric apologia. A "position of practical inferiority" is, as some scholars suggest, a very beneficial stance for the satirist to adopt, and middlebrow studies which fail to account for middlebrow satire run the risk of granting that status to a variety of influential satirists.[82]

By arguing for a renewed interest in middlebrow satire, and by looking beyond both the critical positions which dismiss the middlebrow and those that run the risk of over-praise, we find a form of literature which, in its popularity and charm, offers a long-reaching vehicle for persuasion. By extension, given these factors, that vehicle has the capacity for bringing about real and troubling consequences. In the world of (literary) satire studies, the notion of satiric efficacy has fallen largely out of fashion, given the difficulty involved in measuring satire's impact—not to mention the rise of a scholarly culture which, as we have seen, favours an 'open' approach, accentuating the mode's susceptibility to paradox, ambiguity, and instability. Some recent scholarship, however, suggests that we should consider ways in which satirists are capable of influencing their audiences, and middlebrow studies already has the vocabulary and inclination to give voice to these kinds of stakes.

Various scholars have suggested that the middlebrow can shape or mould its readers. It is a commonplace of middlebrow studies to refer to Virginia Woolf's belief—though she doesn't suggest that this is a positive feature of the middlebrow—that such works inspire in a reader a desire to

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[81] Casey, "Middlebrow Reading," 33.

[82] Ralph M. Rosen, "Efficacy and Meaning in Ancient and Modern Political Satire: Aristophanes, Lenny Bruce, and Jon Stewart," *Social Research* Vol. 79, No. 1 (Spring 2012): 8. https://search-proquest-com.ezproxye.bham.ac.uk/docview/1019433859/fulltextPDF/BA6151304D834873PQ/1?accountid=8630.

do something practical: to "join a society, or, more desperately […] write a cheque".[83] By situating middlebrow satire in a counter-tradition of satire predicated on sympathy, gaiety, and geniality over aggression, cruelty, and indifference, and by locating its persuasive potential in its frivolity rather than in the outspokenly visionary outlook projected by its 'serious' counterparts, there's a real case to be made for thinking about satirical efficacy in this context. There's even, counter-intuitively, a case to be made for reflecting on the harm that some forms of delightful middlebrow satire may be capable of inflicting.

A Note on the Shape of this Book

The primary subjects of this book are Nancy Mitford, P.G. Wodehouse, and G.K. Chesterton. That doesn't mean it's a study *about* any of these figures. Instead, this study simply suggests that comic, middlebrow literature may give rise to a genial form of satire that acts as fertile ground for some of the more grandiose idealisations of the satirist as set forth, historically, in the satiric apologia—and I use limited aspects of Mitford's, Wodehouse's, and Chesterton's writings and reputations to illustrate that point. These are prolific writers, and it's not my intention to offer a comprehensive commentary on any one of them, or to make any claims to sit alongside scholarship dedicated entirely to these figures. Instead, we'll primarily assess my subjects' satire and apologias via some of their most popular works: Mitford's Radlett novels, Chesterton's Father Brown stories, and Wodehouse's Jeeves saga. While I sometimes draw from their vast back catalogues where appropriate, these texts will be dominant throughout. This is partially for reasons of expediency, and partially as a means of keeping the question of satiric efficacy, and the reputation-shaping aspects of the satiric apologia, at the forefront of our minds. If we're thinking about these satirists' abilities to influence their readers and mould their public images, it's appropriate to focus our attention on those works which were (and remain) popularly read. Chesterton wrote extensively on Catholicism and on Father Brown, but when each topic is examined on the grounds of its enduring place in popular culture, one can only concede that the BBC hasn't yet seen fit to fund ten seasons of *The Catholic Church and Conversion* (1926).

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[83] Anna Vaninskaya, "The Political Middlebrow from Chesterton to Orwell" in *The Masculine Middlebrow, 1880-1950: What Mr Miniver Read*, ed. Kate Macdonald (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 164.