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Parties and the Comic Novel in Interwar Britain

by

Eliza Murphy

BA(Hons)

School of Humanities | College of Arts, Law and Education

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Abstract

Parties feature centrally in British interwar novels. Frequent references to and accounts of parties are used by writers in these works to express concerns about the self and its relationship with society in the early twentieth century. Shifting social and economic relations, combined with the aftermath of the First World War and the growth of leisure, gave rise to a body of literature that examined parties in detail. In particular, this thesis argues, the comic mode's inherent concern with the social – through its observation and policing of human behaviour through laughter – made it an ideal vehicle for interwar writers to consider the party.

While Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of carnival is the most influential theory used in scholarly examinations of festivity in literature, this thesis contends that Bakhtin's account cannot fully characterise the divergent representations of the party between the wars. The thesis instead offers a study of the modern party that identifies and examines its people, places, and things. By analysing the elements that constitute parties and their interrelation – such as hosts and guests, clothing and appearance, food and drink, location and décor – this thesis yields new knowledge about how writers perceived the evolution of sociability during a period of increased mobility and change.

In order to situate the deployment and representation of parties, the thesis reads exemplary fictional texts in tandem with a collection of interwar nonfiction texts, including fashion periodicals, newspapers, cookbooks, and etiquette guides. This approach, grounded in cultural history, explores the socially and culturally loaded meanings of the structuring components of interwar festivity, locating the novels within the contexts in which they were first written, published, and read.

The thesis examines a selection of novels by four British writers of comedy: Evelyn Waugh, Stella Gibbons, Nancy Mitford, and E. F. Benson. It offers close readings of how

each writer responded to the party in their work. In Waugh's novels, he positions the relationship between host and guest as the central logic that governs a party's coherency: without it, sociability descends into chaos. For Gibbons, parties contain transformative and aspirational potential, operating as sites of social mobility for both her heroines and middlebrow readers alike. Mitford's focus on specialty festive occasions such as Christmas reveals how the aristocracy use parties to reaffirm ideas of tradition, Englishness, and nationalism — a type of nostalgia that Mitford comically deflates as bathetic. Benson's Mapp and Lucia series, meanwhile, critiques the rigidity of performances at parties through the repetitive narrative structures inherent to the novel series as a form. When taken together, the texts analysed in this thesis reveal the live tensions in interwar British sociability between tradition and modernity.

Introduction

In the summer of 1929, a wave of lavish parties were each competing for the title of the most outstanding social success of the season. The Watteau Party, held at the beginning of July and hosted by Olivia Wyndham and Heather Pilkington, took place on a ship permanently moored to a pier on the Thames. The invitation cards asked guests to follow the Rococo style of Jean-Antoine Watteau in their dress; but “costumes of every period, including that of 1929, were to be seen” (“Mariegold” [3 July 1929] 8). The *Sketch*’s correspondent reported that the party did not finish until dawn. As the partygoers emerged from the ship, the “pale light” on the river as the sun rose looked “very lovely” (8). The Circus Party held a few days later attracted superlatives from the press: according to the *Sketch*, it was “the most wonderful, magnificent, and amazing gathering” (“All” 66). Hosted by fashion designer Norman Hartnell, “an abundance of blue, red, and white draperies” and “silver tissue on the walls and ceiling” adorned the rooms, giving the illusion of a circus tent (“Mariegold” [10 July 1929] 57). The dress code was, of course, circus themed: the Ruthven twins came dressed as apes, while Wyndham accessorised using live snakes. The supper served was “superb,” and the party was attended by “every young and beautiful celebrity” (57). Similarly, the Tropical Party, with its hip and youthful guests, “was hot in more ways than one” (“Passing Hour” 179), and the Second Childhood Party (where guests came dressed as babies and toddlers) “was a huge success” that continued vibrantly into the small hours of the following morning (“Bright Young-Baby Party” 104).

These reports from the 1929 London season present parties as events that bring festive pleasure and joy to all their participants. More usefully for this study, they also demonstrate the vast range of elements involved in the staging of these parties. Hosts carefully considered food, drinks, entertainment, décor, the guest list, the dress code, and so on in order to increase the chances of the party’s success. As the American society hostess,

Elsa Maxwell, wrote in British *Vogue* in 1930, putting on a successful soiree is akin to the “baking of a wonderful soufflé—the ingredients and proportions must be weighed and measured by the hand of an artist” (60). Hosting and attending parties demand specific modes of appearance, manners, and behaviour that mark parties as distinctive events beyond the realm of the everyday and the mundane.

Parties – and the elements that compose them – appear widely in the fiction of the interwar period, although not always in such overtly optimistic ways. Indeed, in the years between the wars, parties feature centrally in literary narratives. Frequent references to and accounts of parties in these works express concerns about the self and its relationship with society. The shifting social and economic relations of the period, combined with the aftermath of the First World War and the growth of leisure, gave rise to a body of literature that examined this modern form of sociability in detail. Consider, for example, one of the most prominent literary party scenes from the early twentieth century: Mrs Ramsay’s dinner party in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* (1927). For Mrs Ramsay, as the hostess, it is vital the dishes for dinner are “served up the precise moment they were ready” (66) and that her guest of honour, William Bankes, receives a “specially tender piece” of the prized *boeuf en daube* (82). The description of Mrs Ramsay’s children selecting her jewels for the evening as a “ceremony” emphasises the significance of what one wears to a party (67). At the dinner party itself, the conversation at the table reveals the difficulties of socialising: while everyone is listening, “something was lacking” (77). Each guest worries that their façade may suddenly be removed: “[p]ray heaven that the inside of my mind may not be exposed [...] The others are feeling this. [...] Whereas, I feel nothing at all” (77). Woolf depicts the party as a performance, with each character putting forward what Erving Goffman describes as a social front, an idealised image of oneself (Goffman 26). For both hosts and guests alike, parties involve complex codes of expectation.

Beyond Woolf, parties are widespread in early twentieth-century Anglophone fiction: the titular festivity of Katherine Mansfield's "The Garden Party" (1922), the raucous parties of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and Carl van Vechten's *Parties* (1930), the debutante dance in Rosamond Lehmann's *Invitation to the Waltz* (1932), and Manderley's annual costume ball in Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938), to name only a few. The fiction of the early twentieth century illustrates the sheer variety of forms the party can take: from tea parties and cocktail parties to garden parties, dinner parties, and weddings; public or private, planned or spontaneous, formal or informal. As Kate McLoughlin observes, both proliferation and diversity characterise the twentieth-century party (2), pointing to its potential as an object of critical study for building knowledge about modern leisure and pleasure.

This use of the party as a narrative device is not exclusive to a particular literary movement; instead, it manifests across a range of British texts from between the wars, from the high modernist to the middlebrow and popular. Of this body of literature, this thesis focuses on four British writers of comedy: E. F. Benson, Stella Gibbons, Nancy Mitford, and Evelyn Waugh, all of whom feature party scenes frequently in their work. While these writers have very different backgrounds – especially concerning their class, gender, sexuality, and politics – they were all writing and publishing fiction during the interwar period. Benson, Gibbons, Mitford, and Waugh use parties in their novels to actively champion and critique particular people, behaviours, concepts, or ideologies. The comic mode's inherent concern with the social – through its observation and policing of human behaviour through laughter – makes it an ideal vehicle for writers to consider the party. I suggest the party offered these writers a space to distil their understanding of and response to the dynamics of interwar sociability. I argue that an approach rooted in cultural history is the best method for understanding these changing attitudes. Being attentive to the contextually-loaded meanings of the structuring elements of festivity – such as those

mentioned in the newspaper reports at the beginning of this introduction – highlights the shifting and varied understandings of leisure and pleasure in the interwar period.

Popular conceptions of interwar parties typically focus on romanticised images of glamour, spectacle, and excess, aided by phrases such as the “Jazz Age” and the “Roaring Twenties.” In the British context, the enduring popularity of the Bright Young People shapes much of this narrative. A group of young socialites known for their treasure hunts, car chases, and fancy dress parties, the Bright Young People found themselves in the spotlight of the British press for the larger part of the 1920s: complimented for their exploits in tabloid magazines, derided in broadsheet newspapers for causing disruptive chaos. For instance, following a particularly wild (and infamous) late-night treasure hunt across London in July 1924, Olivia Wyndham wrote an opinion piece for the *Sketch*, arguing the games occupied those with unchanneled “time and energy” – that is, those who are unemployed (158). While these “gay young sparks” would be willing to be in “the service of the State,” the State “seems so disinclined to make use of them, they might as well sharpen their wits while amusing themselves” (158). In Wyndham’s (and the other Bright Young People’s) eyes, their escapades were merely down to the fact there was not anything more useful to do.

However, the *Sunday Times* chastised the group and this attitude, writing that “surely there are [...] more dignified ways of working off youthful exuberance” (“Treasure” 10). A few days after the *Sunday Times* article, Neil Maclean (a Member of Parliament) was quoted by the press proclaiming the Bright Young People’s stunts as “midnight exhibitions of smart set imbecility” (“Bright Young People” 6). By 1929, this behaviour had come to be expected.

Among various adventures, a hostess thwarted the attempts of several “well-known” Bright Young People to gate-crash her party in Chelsea (“Gate Crashers” 3), and a headline from the *Nottingham Evening Post* alerted its readers to the “Bright Young People’s Latest: A ‘Wild West’ Ball,” where some four hundred guests had participated in the festivities (5). But as D. J. Taylor points out in his historical study of the Bright Young People, the group was “a

creation of the media" (184), with tabloid newspapers conveying a "stylised and self-mythologising" upper-class world (40). It was this very publicity that eventually led to the decline of the movement in the early 1930s (167). The Bright Young People's influence in the interwar British press was out of proportion with their reasonably small membership, and members were primarily contained within certain London suburbs (47). To take the Bright Young People's parties as the only evidence of interwar party-going is a narrow perspective: it elides the variety of festivities during the period by focusing on only a select group of people.

While this account of party-going is undoubtedly relevant to some authors of the interwar years (including Mitford and Waugh), it does not describe the broader conditions that led to the emergence of the party as a prominent form of sociability across a variety of social groups. In working towards a more holistic understanding of the interwar party, I begin not in the twentieth century but the nineteenth: the period widely regarded as what Hugh Cunningham describes as the "making of leisure" (*Leisure* 140). The party, after all, is closely tied to leisure, operating as a festive departure from everyday routines.¹ The industrialisation of cities over the mid to late nineteenth century remapped concepts of time and space: truly demarcating for the first time a clear separation between time spent at work and not at work (Bailey 132). The introduction of legislation that regulated the working week gave workers longer and more stable leisure time, creating the first mass group of pleasure-seekers (Beaven 16). Holidays were also regulated through the introduction of the Bank Holiday Act in 1871, providing nationally observed days of rest. The 1870s and 1880s marked a growth in what Eric Hobsbawm describes as "invented traditions": the inculcation of a series of practices seeking to "establish continuity with a suitable historic past" ("Mass-

¹ However, parties can become the quotidian through their repetitiveness, as my discussion of Waugh in Chapter 3 and of Henry Green in the conclusion shows.

Producing Traditions” 263), including festivities such as May Day, which sought to control and regulate the population during their free time.²

The arrival of the First World War in 1914 somewhat interrupted leisure’s growth, with state regulations such as the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) – described as “the official spoilsport personified” by contemporary commentators Robert Graves and Alan Hodge (114) – limiting the public’s freedom to participate in activities (Bailey 135). While unemployment was a constant issue throughout the interwar years (and especially during the Slump of 1929–32), those who were steadily employed enjoyed increased living standards over the course of the period (Overy xxi; Wrigley xvii–xviii). Growth in real incomes and the introduction of a shorter working week after the First World War allowed leisure to thrive (Russell 16). Workers in major industries received the eight-hour day in the immediate years following the war, although the government did not formally legislate this change (Cunningham, *Time* 100–01). Moreover, the introduction of daylight savings in 1916 allowed workers to make the most of their evenings (Pugh 216). These changing conditions, as Martin Pugh notes, “laid the foundation for the emergence of a leisure-oriented society” in the 1920s and 1930s (216). Indeed, there was substantial growth in leisure activities during the interwar period: sports, cinema and informal forms of holidaymaking continued to surge alongside the introduction of newer forms of leisure, such as dance halls and jazz (Snape 52). The First World War acted as what Rishona Zimring terms as an “acceleration of cosmopolitan modernity” (30), allowing for new modes of sociability, such the cocktail party, claimed to have been invented in 1924 by Waugh’s brother, Alec Waugh, as a way to

² I discuss the concept of invented traditions in relation to specialty festive occasions in detail in Chapter 5.

fill the idle time between “half-past five and seven” (A. Waugh 103).³ The rise of nightclubs in the 1920s created more informal spaces for dancing, social mixing, and the consumption of alcohol (McWilliam 177).⁴ Changing transport technologies — such as the expansion of the Tube network in London and higher levels of car, motorcycle, and bicycle ownership — allowed for greater mobility and the opportunity for sojourns in new locations such as the countryside, where one could participate in the latest craze for “rambling” (Bailey 136). The expanding accessibility and popularity of the cruise liner holiday granted opportunities for celebration and play, relaxing the etiquette and expectations surrounding sociability. This flurry of developments during the 1920s led contemporary gossip columnist and social commentator Patrick Balfour to observe that “few things [...] have changed so much in recent years as our conception of pleasure” (221). For Balfour, while society once found “amusement principally in looking at others doing things,” the society of the twenties and thirties was more interested in “doing” those things for “themselves” (221–22). As Pugh notes, people had begun to regard “work as the means to a life of leisure and pleasure, not an end in itself” (217). The pursuit of leisure and pleasure had become much more active. For Graves and Hodge, quoting from Sir Herbert Nield, interwar Britain had indeed “gone recreation-mad” (114).

As Penny Tinkler notes, the years between the wars was the period when leisure became wholly recognised in public discourse as a significant and “distinct sphere of mass social life defined in relation to paid work” rather than a term signifying the idleness of the

³ The invention of the cocktail party is more commonly attributed to American society hostess Mrs Julius S. Walsh Jr., who, according to local newspapers, held a cocktail party in 1917 in St. Louis, Missouri. See: “Cocktail Parties.” The cocktail party’s introduction to Britain is less certain than in the case of the United States, although it most likely occurred in the early 1920s.

⁴ Pugh claims there were 11,000 nightclubs in London alone by 1925 (218).

upper class ("Cause" 235). Leisure was not reserved only for the leisured classes; while leisure indeed remained "a class differentiated form," it was a familiar concept to all (235). The affordability of entertainment such as cinema and sport, as Robert Snape has illustrated, increased "opportunities for participation" across strata of class and gender (52). But leisure in civil discourse was "both feared and welcomed" during the interwar period (Snape and Pussard 2). For the majority of the working population, their daily work was monotonous, and critics theorised this would lead to "passive pursuits" in workers' leisure time (5). There were also concerns about "enforced leisure" (a veiled term for unemployment), with the view that excessive leisure was problematic as it had no real purpose (6). However, leisure was presented as a positive aspect of twentieth-century modernity, posited as a space for "social and civic renewal," and an opportunity to foster a greater sense of patriotism and community (8).

While the emergence of modern leisure in the early twentieth century led to more opportunity to participate in leisure activities, it is difficult to quantify or qualify how festive events flourished in the 1920s and onwards. Parties—mostly occurring within private and informal spheres—are frequently ephemeral, making them more difficult to trace throughout history than more structured and public leisure activities. Due to this, research into leisure activities of the interwar period has focused mainly on the public sphere, chronicling activities such as participation in sports, attending the cinema, or holidaying in resort towns such as Brighton (see, for example: Huggins and Williams; Miles and Smith; Walton). But as Claire Langhamer points out, "inattention to the informal realm of family, street and neighbourhood can produce only a partial picture of leisure experience" (1). Interwar fiction thus offers a means to understand the largely private and fleeting festivities of the period. When read in tandem with nonfictional discourse on parties, these texts evidence the material, spatial, social, and subjective elements and experiences of this form of leisure.

The party's diversity in this period, however, means it resists easy definition. This challenge was also keenly felt by those in the interwar period concerned with parties. As June and Doris Langley Moore comment in their etiquette guide, *The Pleasure of Your Company: A Text-Book of Hospitality* (1933):

Nowadays almost every kind of friendly gathering is described as a party, so that when you hear someone say, "I was at a party last night," you are entitled to imagine whatever you please in the way of entertainment, from a stately ball to the impromptu encounter of three or four acquaintances in a café. (111)

The interwar use of the word thus captures several social occasions that present-day readers would not necessarily consider as parties, such as dining with others at a restaurant or staying at a friend's home for a weekend. The Langley Moores's definition is not dissimilar to that of the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), which defines the noun "party" in broad terms, describing it as "[a] social gathering [...] typically involving eating, drinking, and entertainment" ("party, n."). This use of "party" emerges in the early eighteenth century, with the OED attributing its earliest usage to George Farquhar's 1707 comedy play *The Beaux' Stratagem*: "[g]ive me a Man that keeps his Five Senses keen and bright as his Sword, [...] with his Reason as Commander at the Head of 'em, that detaches 'em by turns upon whatever Party of Pleasure agreeably offers" ("party, n."). The advent of the term in this period is consistent with the gradual shift from public-facing festivities such as the carnival to more private events like the Venetian-style masquerades popularised in Britain, something which Chapter 1 explores in more detail. Interestingly, even earlier (and now mostly obsolete) usages of the term in other senses imply exclusion. A party is also a part of a whole, a side, a region, and an antagonist ("party, n."). Farquhar qualifies his party as one of pleasure, indirectly pointing to the party's exclusionary status: someone is always outside of the pleasurable experience. The use of "party" as a verb, however, is much more recent, a colloquialism the OED identifies as originating in the early 1920s in North America ("party,

v."). This shift – where the party is both an event and an action or behaviour – reflects its changing role as a form of social interaction. Moreover, several other terms associated with parties ("party-crasher," "party game," "party girl") also find their origins in the interwar years ("party-crasher, n."; "party, n."), indicating the party's growing contemporary relevance. With the interwar party's complexity in mind, I employ a fuzzy logic in defining the party, embracing its capaciousness while also being attentive to the specificity of its subsidiary forms. That is, I am cognisant that while a "party" can refer to almost any number of social events in the interwar period, different forms of parties – such as the dinner party, the cocktail party, the tea party – are delineated by elements such as their temporal and spatial locations and their expected codes of appearance and behaviour.

Despite the prevalence of the party in modern literature, little critical work attempts to understand how it operates within texts. The earliest book-length study, Christopher Ames's *The Life of the Party: Festive Vision in Modern Fiction* (1991), focuses on a wide-ranging selection of modernist, interwar, and postmodernist texts. Through examining the relationship between party scenes and narrative style, Ames argues that the party is the cultural successor to the Renaissance festival (29). Ames uses Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque as the foundation for reading the twentieth-century party in literature, alongside work by Roger Caillois, René Girard, and Émile Durkheim. Ames defines the festival as a "communal controlled transgression," to which he assigns four key concepts: difference, excess, affirmation of life, and the ritual encounter with death (10). These four concepts, Ames asserts, also characterise the modern party (11). The party is a narrowing of festive vision; it channels the transgressive qualities of the festival into an "increasingly private" form of celebration (13). This view of parties, however, downplays their significance as events carrying specific expectations. While the party's rise does come at the same time as the decline of other festivities, the twentieth-century party's many forms and

features, as well as its proliferation, suggests a revitalisation of festive vision rather than a narrowing.⁵

The most recent extensive study of the party in twentieth-century literature is McLoughlin's edited collection *The Modernist Party* (2013). The collection's essays position parties as a modernist concern, providing readings of parties in the works of Mansfield, Woolf, T. S. Eliot, and James Joyce, among others. McLoughlin and the collection's contributors interpret and conceptualise the party in various ways, with their analyses illustrating a range of approaches to studying the party. The collection provides close readings of party scenes in texts, but also reads texts as parties in their narrative and stylistic structures, as well as considering real-life modernist parties and how they function as fields of cultural production and spaces for networking. In particular, the usefulness of McLoughlin's study is in its acknowledgement of the party as a "sign rich in semantic content" (6). Reading the party serves as a gateway to exploring a range of other interrelated concerns issues within a text, such as affect, class, status, politics, gender, and economics.

As I have already explained, the thesis focuses on the works of four writers: Evelyn Waugh, Stella Gibbons, Nancy Mitford, and E. F. Benson. The thesis explores the representation of parties in these writers' works through a considered analysis of the historical and cultural contexts and attitudes of the interwar years. While Ames's study makes a case for the relevance of studying the party in modern fiction more broadly, and McLoughlin's collection argues for the importance of considering the party in relation to modernism, my work is rooted in cultural history, emphasising the need for literary scholars working on the party to consider how context impacts upon its representation. This approach interrogates the specialised objects and behaviours encountered at parties, as well as their specific spatiotemporal locations; questioning the motivations for why participants

⁵ I continue my discussion of Bakhtinian readings of the party in Chapter 1.

dress in certain ways, serve particular food or drink, and behave according to specific social norms. This thesis provides an in-depth exploration of the nature of interwar festivity in Britain, as both represented and lived, by combining the close reading of party scenes with analysis of other interwar texts, such as fashion periodicals, newspapers, cookbooks, and etiquette guides. Through this approach, I show that each writer presents the interwar party in different ways: as a site of chaos and disorder for Waugh, transformation for Gibbons, nostalgia and bathos for Mitford, and performance for Benson. When taken together, their texts reveal the live tensions in interwar Britain between tradition and modernity.

The thesis provides fresh readings of texts that are already the focus of literary critics—such as Gibbons’s *Cold Comfort Farm* and the works of Waugh—alongside analysis of less frequently read texts, such as Gibbons’s works beyond *Cold Comfort Farm*, Mitford’s early novels, and Benson’s Mapp and Lucia series. My range of authors is designed to encompass a variety of concerns and attitudes from different perspectives while also illustrating their similar qualities. Waugh provides insights into the parties of Oxford undergraduates and the Bright Young People, while Gibbons examines the opportunities parties bring for the upwards social mobility of middle-class individuals. Mitford, a keen observer (and herself a member) of the aristocracy, displays how high society uses certain festivities to bolster class divisions, and Benson highlights how the party functions as a site for scheming in a restricted small-town setting.

The range of perspectives offered by these writers, I suggest, is made possible because of their weak ties to each other. While all part of an interconnected social and literary landscape, their connections to each other are somewhat tenuous—something that is a benefit for this research. Paul K. Saint-Amour, in his essay “Weak Theory, Weak Modernism,” inspired by Mark Granovetter’s 1973 piece, “The Strength of Weak Ties,” points to how weak connections can produce strength (447). As Saint-Amour observes, weak ties lead to more vibrant readings and more comprehensive understandings of early

twentieth-century literature (449). A consideration of the weak ties between writers of the interwar years – such as people who may have met only briefly or those who were only associated together through print media – offers a way to more fully conceptualise the literary field of the early twentieth century and “facilitate more diverse and attenuated clusters” (450). While Waugh and Mitford met in the late 1920s, they did not begin a sustained correspondence with each other until the 1940s. Mitford was an avid follower of Benson’s Mapp and Lucia series and recounted talking with him at length about the character of Lucia at a country house party in the late 1930s (Foreword 9–10). Upon the release of *Cold Comfort Farm*, one reviewer allegedly hypothesised that Gibbons was Waugh writing under a pseudonym (Oliver, *Out* 111). Bringing their works together, then, reveals both difference and commonality in how these writers understood, presented, and critiqued the experience of party-going in the interwar years.

Saint-Amour’s analysis is in relation to new modernist studies, a field which, as Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz have argued, is characterised by “expansion” (737). This expansion has undoubtedly revitalised the field, incorporating writers and works beyond the canon and from wider-reaching spatial and temporal locations. But, as Saint-Amour observes, “a field’s strength (in the normative sense) – its vitality, generativity, and populousness – may increase as the immanent theory of its central term weakens (in the descriptive sense)” (451). This, however, is not necessarily a bad thing: modernism’s definitional ambiguity has mostly been more of a boon than a burden for the field, lending it more centrality and importance in literary studies more broadly. “[M]odernism,” Saint-Amour writes, “now functions in local and provisional ways, as an auxiliary term that supports other lines of argument not endogenous to its problem-space” (453).

However, if applications of modernism are now provisional and auxiliary, what benefit does claiming a writer or work as modernist truly offer? In one sense, it is tactical. As Kristin Bluemel and Phyllis Lassner suggest, the prominence of modernist studies and its

status as “a significant career pathway” mean that twentieth-century literature scholars are increasingly “agreeing to identify as scholars of modernism,” and academic publishers are encouraging authors to include “modernism” in their book titles (22). In an era of precarity in higher education, this strategic alliance is not at all surprising. Beyond this, though, I am less convinced about modernism’s expansion.⁶ As someone interested in the recovery of early twentieth-century writing, I am in sympathy with Bluemel and Lassner, who argue that “the rhetorical and ideological gestures that turn virtually all twentieth- [...] century writers into modernist writers diminishes the integrity of our research and limits its impact upon the larger field of literary, historical, and cultural studies” (22). Benjamin Kohlmann and Matthew Taunton assert that modernism is “only one of the many cultural vectors” needed to account more fully for the writing of this period (“Long 1930s” 7–8), suggesting there is a broader critical turn away from modernism as a category that makes all twentieth-century writing legible. Reading these writers’ works as modernist, I argue, would elide and smooth over much of their complexity.

Much in the same way that these writers are weakly connected, I would argue that their alignment with modernism is also weak. These writers all attract a certain ambivalence as to where they “fit” with respect to the period’s literary movements. Waugh has only been read as a late modernist in recent years (Greenberg 47; Milthorpe, *Evelyn Waugh’s Satire* 9), while scholars view Gibbons as late modernist (Greenberg 93), intermodern (Hammill, “Stella Gibbons” 76), and middlebrow (Humble, *Feminine Middlebrow Novel* 24). Benson and

⁶ This is not to say I disagree with or am opposed to the work of scholars such as Susan Stanford Friedman, who argue for plural modernisms that reach far beyond the spatial and temporal boundaries traditionally associated with the term. Rather, my point of discomfort is located specifically in relation to the study of twentieth-century Anglophone writing, and the tendency for recovery work to position works or writers as modernist rather than reading them on their terms.

Mitford, who have received significantly less scholarly attention, are classed as middlebrow in Nicola Humble's seminal study of the movement (*Feminine Middlebrow Novel* 13, 38). But as Bluemel and Lassner assert, writers of the period "do not need to be rescued [...] by modernism" (23). The recovery of under-researched interwar writing should be focused less on placing writers and works into a frame where they might not readily fit, and more on being attuned to the heterogeneity of the period's writing: writers which complicate our current understanding of modernism and the literary landscape. Take Benson as an example: while he has attracted the least scholarly attention of the four writers, he raises some of the most provocative questions about literary classification. Born in the 1860s and writing popular fiction on both sides of the *fin de siècle*, Benson complicates notions of a rupture between nineteenth/twentieth-century and Victorian/modernist writing. The writers examined in this thesis enrich and diversify our understanding of the interwar literary field precisely because they refuse to fit neatly into its dominant theoretical framework. With this in mind, no attempt is made in this thesis to pigeon-hole these texts or writers as modernist.

This thesis uses a collection of interwar nonfiction texts to situate the deployment and representation of parties in comic novels of this period. This approach, grounded in cultural history, explores the socially and culturally loaded meanings of the structuring elements of interwar festivity, locating close readings of novels within the contexts in which they were first written, published, and read. While advocates of postcritique methodologies such as Rita Felski and Bruno Latour claim (via architect Rem Koolhaas) "context stinks!" (Felski 573; Latour 148), this thesis finds affinity more with Fredric Jameson's call to "[a]lways historicize!" (ix). Research anchored in print cultures serves to disrupt modernism as a cultural category, as Faye Hammill and Mark Hussey have demonstrated in their survey of recent scholarship in this area (173). Such an approach also adds to the recent material turn in modernist and twentieth-century literature studies, reflecting Ann Ardis

and Patrick Collier's assertion that to study the culture of this period demands "renewed attention" to its evolving "print ecology" (2). Relevant texts to the party from this ecology include etiquette guides and advice manuals, cookbooks, periodicals, and newspapers. Parties are a recurrent topic in these texts, confirming their centrality to the public consciousness. Across fiction and nonfiction, there are multiple views and opinions on parties and their value. These texts complement, extend, or even contradict the views of the authors at the centre of this thesis. Despite their differences in opinion, each text at its core is interested in behaviour: questions about how people act and how they should act.

Etiquette guides and advice manuals establish idealised expectations about social behaviour. Their topics vary from the large-scale to the highly specific: from Clifford Montrose's *Everyday Etiquette* (1935), which supplies counsel on a variety of social situations, including the cruise holiday, dancing, and attending the theatre, to John and Mary Davidson's *The Twenty-First Birthday and How to Celebrate It* (1937), which focuses on a very particular festive event. All of these texts, however, emphasise the centrality of entertaining and parties to decorous behaviour. Mary Woodman's *Correct Conduct: Or, Etiquette for Everybody* (1922), a book small enough to fit in one's pocket and with its topics arranged in alphabetical order to allow easy reference, includes sections on "Dinners, Hints for the Hostess," "Guests," and "Invitations" (35, 43, 50). Likewise, Lady Kitty Vincent's *Good Manners* (1924) – targeted at a more upper-class audience – dedicates chapters to a debutante's first court, entertaining, and visiting country houses. These texts are valuable primary sources because they indicate shifting attitudes about what constitutes proper conduct. As Grace Lees-Maffei shows, the output of etiquette and advice related texts is most prevalent during moments of heightened social change and mobility, such as the 1930s (191, 205). Moreover, etiquette guides and advice manuals differ to other forms of advice – such as that offered in a magazine column – because etiquette gains its authority from its emphasis on tradition (191). These guides and manuals are inherently conservative and

didactic in their form, seeking to implement and police behaviour by a particular set of standards, and this conservatism must be taken into account when reading these texts.

Cookbooks offer an insight into entertaining trends as well as broader shifts in Britain's food culture. For instance, they supply tips on how to make do with less (whether income or domestic staff), modernise one's menus, and cook with the seasons. The interwar years were somewhat of a food revolution in Britain (Humble, "Little Swans" 329), encapsulated particularly in the cookbooks of X. Marcel Boulestin, which are credited with bringing the ethos of provincial French cooking to Britain in the early 1920s. But cookbooks are more than just their recipes, as Humble observes, containing commentary on topics such as history, travel, politics, and science ("Little Swans" 322). Likewise, they offer perspectives on parties and entertaining beyond food and drink, such as suggestions for décor and decorating and tips on being a good host. Indeed, as Chapter 6 discusses, entertaining is a central feature of interwar cookbooks, frequently used as the "organizing principle" for recipe and menu collections (Humble, *Culinary Pleasures* 54).

Three magazines — *Good Housekeeping*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *Vogue* — provide the backbone of this project's engagement with periodical culture. Not only do these magazines contain valuable commentary on parties, but they also served as publishing venues for the authors studied in this thesis: Gibbons in *Good Housekeeping*, Waugh in *Harper's*, Mitford in *Vogue*. These magazines all targeted a feminine audience, with *Good Housekeeping's* pricing and content reflecting a lower-middle-class readership, while *Harper's* and *Vogue* sought an upper-middle to upper-class readership. Articles on topics such as how to be a good host and guest, the best fashion items for particular festive occasions, suggested décor for entertaining, and recommended party games, fill the pages of these periodicals. The growth of digitised periodical collections can lead to a tendency to "cherry pick" sources through the use of keyword searches, an action that can strip the material from the context in which it was published (Clay et al., "Re-Mediating Women" 6). With this in mind, I consulted

physical copies of the periodicals to gain a holistic understanding of how these articles fit into the larger narrative of each magazine. An approach that considers the relationship between “text, image, and design,” is, as Tinkler notes, one that recognises the “composite” form of magazines (“*Miss Modern*” 154).

Newspapers, from the broadsheet (such as the *Times*) to the tabloid (the *Tatler*, the *Sketch*), are also consulted. I draw on a range of different elements of the newspaper, including news reports, opinion editorials, letters to the editor, and, in the case of tabloid newspapers, society columns. Newspapers not only provide documentation of particularly newsworthy parties (such as the activities of the Bright Young People) but also reveal multiple perspectives on the merits of modern forms of sociability, from polemic opinion pieces on the idleness of modern youth to the glowing reviews of their exploits by gossip columnists.

A key element of newspapers and magazines is advertising, which brings overt attention to the relationship between brand and consumer, offering insights into how brands positioned themselves in relation to sociability and the party. I often read these advertisements in concert with, or in the context of, their medium of publication, considering how the magazine or newspaper the advertisement appears in mediates the brand/consumer relationship. For example, Player’s Bachelors cork-tipped cigarettes receive a full-page advertisement in *Harper’s Bazaar* in April 1931, showing three women and two men gathered around a lounge, all with a cigarette in hand (figure 0.1). The tagline – “[n]o party is complete without Bachelors” – ties the cigarette, an object of glamour and modernity, to both sexual success and the success of a soiree itself.⁷ By appearing in *Harper’s Bazaar*, a publication that projects sophistication, the advertisement directly targets its intended market of a predominately feminine readership interested in appearing refined to

⁷ For more on the cigarette as a modern object for women in interwar Britain, see Tinkler and Warsh.

others. Likewise, a spread for the ready-to-wear fashion label Dorville in a November 1932 issue of *Vogue* stressed that just one of their economically priced dresses would “see you through the day from crack of dawn till the cocktail hour” (figure 0.2). The illustration, depicting four women smoking and drinking cocktails in Dorville dresses, immediately aligns the brand with cosmopolitanism and modernity. Yet, its emphasis on economy ensures it does not alienate *Vogue*’s many aspirational readers, who looked to the periodical for inspiration on how to look chic for less.⁸

⁸ I analyse the aspirational qualities of periodicals in more detail in Chapter 4.



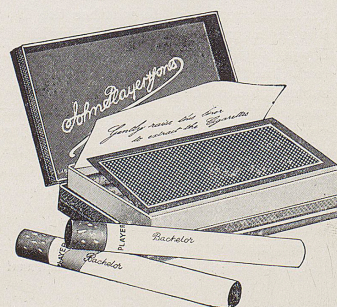
*No party is complete
without Bachelors*

PLAYER'S BACHELORS

CORK TIPPED CIGARETTES

10 for 6^p

*Better Smoke
Bachelors*



Issued by The Imperial Tobacco Company (of Great Britain and Ireland), Ltd.

Figure 0.1: Advertisement for Player's Bachelors cork-tipped cigarettes, *Harper's Bazaar*, April 1931, p. 8. © Imperial Tobacco Limited.



FENWICK Gown Dept.

The knitted frock is to the fore again. A hand-knit effect is achieved in this inexpensive Dorville model.

HARRODS Small Size Gown Dept.

Parallel rings of dull braid adorn this Dorville one-piece frock in the latest waffle tweed.

PETER JONES

A detachable cowl front in crinkly surfaced silk unites with a trim frock in nubbly jersey.

FENWICK Gown Dept.

Striped jersey is used to ornament this very moderately priced Dorville frock in knitted fabric.

CHIC IS A TRIUMPH OF MIND OVER MONEY

Let the other woman have her inflated income you can match her affluence with your sense if you cultivate a Dorville view point.

Dean Swift said—or didn't he?—that the greatest benefactor of woman-kind is he who could make one frock do where two did before. One Dorville Model will see you through the day from crack of dawn till the cocktail hour so amusingly depicted above.



Ask your favourite store to show you the new Dorville Models, or write to Dorville House for a booklet of illustrations.

DORVILLE MODELS.

Wholesale only: Rose & Blairman Ltd., Dorville House, 34-35-36 Margaret Street, London. W.

Figure 0.2: Advertisement for Dorville, *Vogue*, 9 November 1932, p. 22.

Reading across a range of texts reveals how parties were discussed, understood, and debated in the years between the wars in Britain. Nevertheless, particular agendas and perspectives imbue these cultural texts just as much as novels, meaning they cannot be viewed as truth-revealing documents. As Celia Marshik's study of garments in modernist and middlebrow literature shows, the key in a context-based approach to literary analysis is to think of literary texts as "participat[ing] in a conversation" or dialogue with their historical moment, rather than using context as the definite and concrete explication of a text (186). Rather than one collective voice emerging, there will be both consensus and disagreement.

The thesis begins with a discussion of the theories and contexts behind studying parties. Chapter 1 proposes a new critical framework for reading the party. Central to this chapter is an examination of Bakhtin's theory of carnival, the most pervasive existing theory of festivity. By tracing the evolution of the party from the early modern period to the twentieth century, I argue that Bakhtin's theory fails to fully characterise the divergent representations of the party in the years between the wars. Taking Woolf's idea that there is a specific "party consciousness" as my starting point (*Diary* 3: 12), I instead offer an understanding of the party that focuses on its people, places, and things. Drawing upon thing theory, cultural geography, dramaturgical sociology, and phenomenology, I suggest a consideration of four concepts is necessary to account for the modern party and the party consciousness fully. These concepts are all closely related and interconnected: the nature of material objects (materiality); the actions and behaviours of hosts and guests (sociality); the production and use of space (spatiality); and the consciousness of the self (subjectivity).

Chapter 2 provides an overview of comedy's relationship to the interwar party. Positioning the comic mode as inherently concerned with critiquing social behaviour, and drawing primarily from Henri Bergson's theory of laughter, I suggest writers turned to

comedy as a way to understand and negotiate this modern form of sociability. Through a broad survey of interwar comic novels, I identify the party as an integral literary device to the form of these texts. I argue that Bergson's ideas best reflect the concerns of the British interwar comic novel, which continually critiques how rigid, mechanical, and conventional behaviours hinder the fluidity of modern sociability. Importantly, this comic sensibility also manifests in the treatment of parties in nonfiction texts, revealing how parties saturated the public consciousness.

The remaining four chapters offer author-based case studies. Chapter 3 looks at the works of Evelyn Waugh, examining three early satires: *Decline and Fall* (1928), *Vile Bodies* (1930), and *A Handful of Dust* (1934). In these novels, the relationship between host and guest is positioned as the central logic that governs a party's coherency. The etymological tension inherent to "hospitality" – the word's Latin origins can be linked to both "stranger" and "hostility" – is played out through Waugh's satire. Waugh's parties display the decay of good hospitality: hosts are absent or unreceptive while guests are parasitic or unwanted. In *Decline and Fall*, a lack of discipline and authority leaves hospitality devoid of any of its altruistic qualities. *Vile Bodies*, Waugh's most infamous novel about party-going, strips its Bright Young People of any substance, leading to a series of chaotic parties where hosting entails no real commitment. In *A Handful of Dust*, Waugh's first novel conceived entirely after his conversion to Catholicism, Waugh contrasts hospitality in Britain and abroad to display the emptiness of spiritually vacant ritual. These novels present parties not as sites for celebration and pleasure, but spaces where tradition and manners give way to a modern form of sociability that Waugh perceives as shallow and decadent.

Chapter 4 considers the works of Stella Gibbons, reading her first and most well-known novel *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932) alongside *Bassett* (1934) and *Nightingale Wood* (1938). These novels show the transformative and aspirational qualities of festivity. Gibbons depicts a range of everyday heroines, including spinsters, widows, rural women, and working

women, who all transform in order to attend a party outside of their usual set of society. These transformations result in a number of positive outcomes, such as romance, marriage, and renewed levels of self-confidence. In *Cold Comfort Farm*, texts are central to the transformations of Elfine Starkadder and Aunt Ada Doom. In particular, the championing of the fictional philosophy book *The Higher Common Sense* by the novel's protagonist Flora Poste plays a crucial role in providing a procedure for navigating life, sociability, and festivity. *Bassett* displays the transformative power of clothing by suggesting that a new evening gown can have positive, long-lasting effects upon its wearer, while the publication history of *Nightingale Wood* inflects upon its aspirational qualities. Initially serialised in *Good Housekeeping*, the novel deliberately targets the periodical's audience by suggesting frugal and pragmatic approaches to festivity. Central to all of these parties, however, is the privileging of the everyday heroine, a relatable figure for Gibbons's middlebrow audience, whose aspirations align with their own. This chapter draws upon interwar women's periodicals, such as *Vogue* and *Good Housekeeping*, which also emphasise an explicitly aspirational tone in the production and collation of their content. In their transformative and aspirational potential, I argue, parties in Gibbons's work champion and empower their middlebrow readers.

Chapter 5 focuses on Nancy Mitford's first three novels: *Highland Fling* (1931), *Christmas Pudding* (1932), and *Wigs on the Green* (1935). These novels – dismissed even by Mitford's biographers for their supposed triviality (see Hastings 129; Thompson 88) – focus on speciality festivities: the Highland shooting party, Christmas celebrations, and the pageant play. As such, they offer an insight into the discourse surrounding some of the more specific and structured festivities of the interwar years. Mitford's works position their aristocratic characters as emblematic of Svetlana Boym's concept of restorative nostalgia: they attempt to use specialty parties as a means to sustain class divisions. The parties in Mitford's novels thus highlight how nostalgia is not an innocent affective experience but

rather one that is politicised and advocates for particular agendas. But Mitford presents these festivities not as legitimate sources of class distinction, but as invented traditions through the use of bathos. In figuring the locales of these parties as dull, unrefined, and unsatisfying, Mitford continually undercuts and deflates the lofty expectations of her characters. Style and taste, Mitford suggests, can no longer act as indicators of social standing. Mitford's novels, when read in concert with etiquette guides and accounts of the society season in periodicals such as *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*, depict how the aristocracy use parties to reaffirm ideas of tradition, Englishness, and nationalism—ideas that in turn attempt to reinforce weakening class structures.

Chapter 6 looks at the final three novels in E. F. Benson's Mapp and Lucia series: *Mapp and Lucia* (1931), *Lucia's Progress* (1935), and *Trouble for Lucia* (1939). These novels, which were eminently popular at the time of their release and still attract a cult following today, are entertainment about entertainment. Through their seriality and the repetition inherent to this form, these texts aim to supply amusing readerly pleasure. Much of the pleasure produced by the Mapp and Lucia series, I argue, is in its representation of performances at parties, which are always deliberate and conscious acts on the part of their participants. Drawing on interwar cookbooks and guides to entertaining, I examine how music and food are used as tools for performance at parties in the series. My discussion of music focuses on the piano, and how it is an object for performance both when it is played, such as the repeated recitals of Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata," and when it is used as a surface for displaying other objects. In its representation of food—including that now-famous dish emblematic of scheming, *Lobster à la Risesholme*—the Mapp and Lucia novels show how performances involving food move between surfeit and restraint in order to advance social and cultural capital. Benson's Victorian vantage point offers a unique perspective on interwar sociability, especially when compared to the other writers examined in this study.

The Second World War effectively brought an end to the proliferation of parties that characterised the interwar period. The conclusion addresses this decline through an analysis of Henry Green's *Party Going* (1939), a novel published in the same month as the war was declared. In the context of the late 1930s, I argue that the title can be read in two ways: both as the act of partying ("party-going") and as a reflection on the looming sense that the leisure and pleasure provided by parties was soon to come under siege. The novel's plot—where a group of guests never reach their party destination after becoming stuck at a train station due to fog—is a fitting coda to the festivity of the interwar years.

Broadly, this thesis seeks to illustrate how social occasions such as the party are useful sites of examination for literary scholars. By focusing on the elements that compose parties—such as location, clothing, food, drink, décor, and entertainment—close readings of fictional parties yield new understandings of how writers perceived the evolution of sociability during a period of great mobility and change. As the following chapters show, these novels reveal several different attitudes towards the party: as a decadent loss of manners in Waugh, as a site of transformation in Gibbons, the locus of nostalgia and bathos in Mitford, and as an opportunity for theatrical performance in Benson. Moreover, when taking these interpretations together, they display the prominence of debates about tradition and modernity in interwar Britain.

Chapter 1

How to Read a Party

But my present reflection is that people have any number of states of consciousness: & I should like to investigate the party consciousness, the frock consciousness &c. The fashion world at the Becks — Mrs Garland was there superintending a display — is certainly one; where people secrete an envelope which connects them & protects them from others, like myself, who am outside the envelope, foreign bodies. These states are very difficult (obviously I grope for words) but I'm always coming back to it. The party consciousness, for example: Sybil's consciousness. You must not break it. It is something real. You must keep it up; conspire together. Still I cannot get at what I mean. (*Diary* 3: 12–13)

— Virginia Woolf, diary entry, 27 April 1925.

I begin with Woolf's diary because it captures the centrality of experience to the party: how one encounters festivity and its associated elements, and how this impacts upon the human subject. Written just before the publication of one of her most party-centric novels, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), this entry has not gone without attention from scholars. However, while many have addressed the meaning and implications of the "frock consciousness" in Woolf's work,¹ less attention has been directed towards the other state of consciousness Woolf identifies, the "party consciousness." Woolf's interest in consciousness — how we perceive our very being — is rooted in its plurality: there are "any number of states of consciousness," and different situations generate different states. Implicit in Woolf's claim is the recognition that these states are specific and unique in their construction. The frock consciousness gestures to how fashion impacts upon the self and the self's relation to others, while the party consciousness signals how the party, as a particular form of interaction, influences

¹ See, for example: Cohen 150; Garrity, "Virginia Woolf" 201; Marshik 181; Plock 193.

subjectivity and sociality. The party consciousness, then, points to the party's specificity. Parties require particular structuring elements, elements that mark them as events outside of the routines of everyday life: hosts and guests, designated spatial and temporal locations, and specific forms of food, drink, dress, and entertainment. These elements create specialised responses from the party's participants, influencing their behaviour and manners, and creating the party consciousness Woolf describes.

Woolf is interested in how encountered situations are experienced, suggesting her understanding of consciousness is phenomenological. As Carole Bourne-Taylor and Ariane Mildenberg argue, there are strong links between modernity and phenomenology: "both the modern self and the phenomenological self experience the same torment, trying to come to terms with [...] the crisis of European modernity" (5). Given this commonality, it is not surprising that the party – which was a dominant festive form during twentieth-century modernity – caught Woolf's attention as an event that warranted closer examination. Woolf's hyperawareness of the party and the consciousness it generates is an indicator of the party's prominence and importance in early twentieth-century British culture.

Phenomenology is particularly productive for reading the party because of the party's specific temporal qualities: its ephemerality and status as a departure from everyday routine have a direct impact upon experience. As Bourne-Taylor and Mildenberg point out, temporality is key to how the self comes to understand the situation it is in (12). An analysis of the party based in phenomenology places the experience of hosting and attending parties at its centre.

While this chapter does not aim to produce a truly phenomenological reading of the party, phenomenology's focus on the impact of direct experience upon consciousness serves as inspiration. In particular, the chapter uses Sara Ahmed's work on orientation as an entry point to understanding the party and the party consciousness. As Ahmed writes, "consciousness is always directed toward objects and hence is always worldly, situated, and

embodied" ("Orientations" 544). Ahmed's privileging of orientation offers a method for looking at the party that places the observer in the shoes of a host or guest. To examine the party through the lens of orientation is to interrogate how different elements of the party work to orientate the individual and impact upon direct experience. Ahmed's understanding of orientation contemplates "not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitance, as well as 'who' or 'what' we direct our energy and attention toward" (*Queer Phenomenology* 3). Central to Ahmed's argument is a consideration of the spaces, people, and objects that surround us in a given situation — elements that are particularly pertinent to the party.

This chapter posits an approach for reading the party that analyses its people, places, and things, and considers how these elements impact upon individual and social experience. It does not attempt to offer this approach as a step-by-step method. Instead, the ideas presented here function as an entrance point into the party, drawing attention to its key components. Together, they form a viewpoint that implicitly informs the focus and direction of my analysis in the chapters that follow. Much like Ahmed, my reading of the party is not "'properly' phenomenological" (*Queer Phenomenology* 2): I also draw on aspects of thing theory, new cultural geography, and dramaturgical sociology in order to explore these elements. I argue that the consideration of three interconnected dimensions is necessary in approaching the party: the nature of material objects (materiality); the actions and behaviours of hosts and guests (sociality); and the production and use of space (spatiality). These dimensions are fundamental to how the individual orientates themselves at parties and shape their experience and consciousness (subjectivity). I begin by briefly tracing the evolution of the party from the early modern period to the early twentieth century in order to consider how existing theories of festivity — primarily those of Bakhtin — are only partially useful in accounting for the modern party. I then move to a discussion of the four notions

germane to the party: materiality, sociality, spatiality, and subjectivity. To read the party, I suggest, first requires an understanding of the party consciousness.

The Evolution of the Party

The emergence of the modern party can largely be attributed to a gradual shift since the sixteenth century from public to private forms of festivity. The feasts and fairs of the early modern period, as Peter Burke argues, were public-facing events embodying the sense of a world being turned upside down (188–96). This joyous transgression and free interaction characterise what C. L. Barber describes as Shakespeare’s “festive comedies,” such as *Twelfth Night* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (6). Early modern festivity, then, is characterised by its public settings, transgressive qualities, and temporary social levelling.

These forms of early modern festivity are where Bakhtin locates his theory of the carnival and the carnivalesque. In *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1963; English translation 1984), Bakhtin describes the carnival as an event where seemingly impermeable hierarchies are eliminated, allowing for free contact between people (123). Individuals are freed from regulation and are permitted to behave how they wish without retribution, leading to *mésalliances* and blasphemy (123). Central to the carnival is “the pathos of shifts and changes”: it is dualistic, simultaneously allowing annihilation and rebirth (124). Carnival celebrates this process of shift and change: nothing is absolute, but everything has “joyful relativity” (125).

For Bakhtin, the spirit of carnival leads to the “carnivalization” of literature, where the language of carnival — “from large and complex mass actions to individual carnivalistic gestures” — is transposed into literary forms (122). This idea is explored in the later work *Rabelais and His World* (1965; English translation 1968), where Bakhtin introduces the term “carnavalesque,” which describes the “best preserved fragments of carnival” (218). Focusing on Renaissance writer François Rabelais’s *The Life of Gargantua and of Pantagruel*, Bakhtin

argues that the presence of carnival and the carnivalesque in Rabelais's works is a response to the Renaissance ideal of individuals speaking freely and frankly (271). Those within the carnivalesque crowd during times of festivity are free from any form of organisation that may dictate their behaviour (255).

However, as Bakhtin acknowledges in *Problems*, the carnival is not a form that continues without change beyond the early modern period. As Burke's study of early modern European popular culture shows, these festive events began to decline over the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as members of the educated elite, motivated mainly by religion, attempted to reform the popular culture of everyday people (207). For the reformers, celebratory feasts and festivals contained too much paganism, indulgence, and excess (209). These events blurred the distinction between the sacred and profane, creating irreverence (211–12). However, Bakhtin suggests the sense of carnival, although diminished, lives on in fiction. In *Problems*, Bakhtin locates the carnivalization of literature in the work of nineteenth-century writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky. Parsing Dostoyevsky's understanding of carnival as one learned from earlier literary traditions, Bakhtin argues the height of carnival in both life and literature is the Renaissance (160). Within Dostoyevsky's work, Bakhtin locates two levels of carnivalization: proper carnival and "*carnivalistic overtones*" (146). The latter is more common than the former, found in the words and imagery of Dostoyevsky's works (146). While writers of the Renaissance used real-life encounters with carnival as their inspiration — "[t]he source of carnivalization was carnival itself" — by the late seventeenth century, the carnival was largely reduced to a literary form (131).

The decline of these public forms of festivity meant that by the eighteenth century, more selective and private celebratory events, such as masquerades and balls, had replaced the carnivals and festivals of the early modern period (Ames 5). Terry Castle's analysis of the eighteenth-century masquerade confirms this new private realm for social gatherings, noting that bounded settings such as assembly rooms became the primary venue for

masquerades (27). The increasing exclusivity of these events is reflected in the literature of the period, which places a stronger emphasis on the actions of individuals than on the festive spirit of an entire community. Concerns surrounding sociability and the self begin to figure prominently, with increasing anxieties about how the individual fits into the festive and social realm. In Frances Burney's *Evelina* (1778), for instance, a series of *faux pas* at society balls characterises the naïve heroine's introduction to London society. These concerns continue into the nineteenth century, from the dances in Jane Austen's comedies of manners to the dinner parties in the novels of Henry James. As Roy Strong's history of feasting shows, the nineteenth-century dinner party was "an expression of class solidarity" and "one of the great prestige symbols of the era" (273, 293). The festive gatherings of the nineteenth-century novel – dances, balls, dinner parties – indicate a further narrowing of festive participants, frequently drawn along lines of class and status.

The gradual privatisation of festivity is closely linked to the emergence of modernity. By the turn of the twentieth century, the party emerges in its recognisable contemporary form. As both Ames and McLoughlin note, the twentieth-century party is a product of bourgeois society (Ames 6; McLoughlin 17). Major developments in areas such as transport, architecture, clothing, and technology, McLoughlin continues, "created a distinctly modern version of the party" (17). As the introduction has already demonstrated, the growth of leisure after the First World War created more opportunity for festive celebration. Moreover, changing attitudes in relation to status-markers such as wealth and class allowed for greater social mixing, and social occasions could be arranged more spontaneously thanks to higher levels of urbanisation and advances in transport technologies. With this widening scope, the twentieth-century party comes to represent a variety of festivities falling at different points on the spectrums between public and private, formal and informal.

For Ames – who uses Bakhtin's carnivalesque as his foundation for understanding festivity – the modern party is a realm for excessive behaviour operating in contrast to

regular existence. As I mentioned in the introduction, central to Ames's understanding of the party is the "ritual encounter with death": the idea that an acute awareness of the temporality of life is inextricably tied to the pleasurable feelings experienced at parties (11). Ames positions celebration as an inherent element of parties, where the guest is asked to "leave behind any particular mood and cares from the outside world and, figuratively, to don a celebrative mask" (11). Ames sees Bakhtin's conceptualisation of carnival as still relevant to the modern party, arguing that the post-Renaissance fragmentation of the carnival should be perceived positively, with carnival elements diffusing themselves over time into a wide variety of "increasingly private" festive forms (13). Like the carnival, "[p]arties enact [...] the symbolic drama of death and rebirth," but this "enactment depends on the problematics of individual and group" (24). Ames's emphasis on the individual is a marked departure from Bakhtin, who stresses that carnival is a purely collective experience (*Problems* 122). Building on Ian Watt's seminal idea that a simultaneously growing sense of individualism is evident in the growth of the novel at the end of the seventeenth century, Ames argues the twentieth-century novel can represent experience both from the dialogical perspective Bakhtin identifies and in relation to the modern individual's struggle for identity (26-27). Indeed, instances of festivity become more critical than ever in modern society, serving as events that reunite individuals with their community (25). Yet Ames acknowledges the modern party cannot engage an entire community in the same way Bakhtin's carnival does, admitting modern festivities can (and frequently do) uphold or reinforce social hierarchies. However, he quickly dismisses this issue of hierarchy as a reflection of society's diachronic changes (12). Ames's modified take on the carnival is a bold position: by avoiding issues of hierarchy, Ames's study avoids an aspect of carnival that Bakhtin considers to be one of its most central and defining features.

Other scholars are less convinced about the relevance of carnival to the fiction of the twentieth century. As McLoughlin observes, Bakhtin's carnival cannot wholly account for

parties in modernist fiction as it fails to consider “other theories of intense behaviour” and the potential implications that context-bound issues such as sex, race, and the First World War could have on festivity and transgression (15). Similarly, Naomi Milthorpe argues that the parties in satirical interwar literature rarely produce a Bakhtinian sense of joyful renewal; the “affective landscape” in these novels is largely more negative than positive (“Heavy Jokes” 72). Marius Hentea’s analysis of parties in a selection of 1930s novels focuses on how they illustrate the growing fragmentation of society (92) – a reading which very much focuses on how parties reinforce (rather than disturb) hierarchy.

Recent scholarship outside of literary studies also contests the applicability of Bakhtin’s theory of the carnival to modern festivity and other leisure activities. For Dion Georgiou, while there are some “ostensible continuities” between the early modern carnival and contemporary leisure practices, these “similarities of form” should not be confused with “equivalence of function” (338). Economic, social, and cultural climates have changed so considerably in the interim that a comparison only “obscure[s] more than [it] reveal[s]” (338). Chris Humphrey similarly critiques how Bakhtin’s theory becomes a “yardstick” for measuring modern popular culture (*Politics* 32). This approach, Humphrey argues, leads to readings where Bakhtin’s account of the medieval carnival is taken to be historically accurate when it actually “reduce[s] a complex range of cultural forms to a neat chronological aphorism” (“Bakhtin” 168). Moreover, it conveniently elides some five hundred years of history between the early modern period and contemporary culture (168). The modern party, with its increasing exclusivity and a declining sense of uncontrolled transgression without consequence, is at odds with Bakhtin’s depiction of the highly public and unfettered Renaissance carnival.

Other theorists similarly characterise festivity as a period of transgression, liberation, and liminality. For instance, Durkheim argues that communal gatherings allow participants to feel like they are in another realm beyond the ordinary constraints of life, where they can

behave freely (218). Durkheim links festivity to religion, arguing that the foundation of religion is predominately social, and that religion is characterised by a dichotomy between the sacred and the profane (40–41). Caillois's sociological approach to festivity, which draws upon Durkheim's sacred/profane dichotomy, places excess as the festival's central characteristic. Defining the festival as a period opposed to ordinary life, Caillois argues that these excesses can take place because the festival suspends the order of the world (97). Girard is likewise interested in excess: the excess of the festival means festivity is centrally tied to violence. The licence the festival grants for unnatural and transgressive behaviour permits violence via sacrifice (127). Arguing that violence is an inescapable part of society, Girard claims that channelling violence into sacrifice transforms it from something unreasonable and illegal to a reasoned and legitimate activity (24).

Victor Turner's theory of *communitas* finds its basis in Arnold van Gennep's theory of the rites of passage. Using van Gennep's three-phase model – consisting of separation, margin, and aggregation (van Gennep 11) – Turner focuses on the middle phase, margin, to develop his concept of liminality, a state of ambiguity where a realm has “few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state” (*Ritual* 94). Liminality levels or erases hierarchies such as rank and status, creating what Turner describes as “*communitas*,” a community without structure or difference that directly opposes the hierarchical structures in normative society (95–96). However, as social life is a dialectical process, liminality and *communitas* can only be temporary (96). Instances of celebration act as a period of liminality, liberating social structures and creating *communitas* (Introduction 29).

Studies of festivity and celebration also commonly deploy theories of transgression. The most seminal work on transgression is by Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, who broaden Bakhtin's approach to the carnival in order to understand how transgression operates in relation to a range of cultural practices. Bakhtin's carnival and the carnivalesque, they argue, should be thought of as “an instance of a wider phenomenon of transgression”

(26). Central to Stallybrass and White's ideas is the notion that the cultural categories of high and low are inseparable, and that the high/low opposition forms the basis of "ordering and sense-making" in Western cultures (3). By broadening the view of when and where transgression takes place, they argue, it becomes evident that transgression is "intrinsic to the dialectics of social classification" (26). Likewise, Georges Bataille—long interested in questions surrounding excess and expenditure—argues that "[o]rganised transgression together with the taboo make social life what it is" (65). For Bataille, transgression is an act that "*transcends*" and "*completes*" taboo (63): taboos take place in the profane world, while "[t]he sacred world depends on limited acts of transgression" (68). However, Bataille does not position the transgression and the threshold as a simple binary: while transgression "opens the door into what lies beyond the limits usually observed [...] it maintains these limits just the same" (67). Michel Foucault, following on from Bataille, similarly defines transgression as "an action which involves the limit" (33). Both this limit and the transgression itself are continually moving: "transgression incessantly crosses and recrosses a line which closes up behind it [...] and thus it is made to return once more right to the horizon of the uncrossable" (34). Transgression for both Bataille and Foucault is not about passing the threshold; instead, there are multiple thresholds (and transgressions) operating along a continuum.

These accounts all assume a repeated structure to festivity. But this view does not fully account for modern festivity's diversity, both in terms of formal variety and participant experience. While parties provide opportunities for the transgression that Bakhtin and others describe—and indeed, it features in many of the novels studied in this thesis—it is not a central or compulsory element to modern festivity. All transgression has the potential for retribution, and twentieth-century writing regularly demonstrates the consequences of such festive transgression. Furthermore, rules and expectations surrounding behaviour at parties can stifle the chance of transgression entirely. While these theories suggest the party

is entirely separated from the everyday, it is not entirely removed from it: as the following chapters show, what happens at parties routinely reverberates into the everyday. Rather than indicating a purely transgressive realm, the specific features and qualities of festivity signal the importance of considering the party's elements, which take on renewed or different meaning to their everyday associations.

The continued application of Bakhtin's work to studies of contemporary festivity is in part because the party is a relatively under-researched phenomenon in literary studies and other related disciplines. Ames notes anthropological studies tend to understate the importance of contemporary informal festivities such as parties (15). Indeed, as the work emerging out of the growing interdisciplinary field of festive studies shows, there is a strong focus on more formal and ritualised events than the private party, such as modern festivals, civic celebrations, and holiday rituals. Despite the field's avoidance of more informal festivities, its underlying ideas confirm the potential of the party as an object of study and its importance in revealing aspects of historical periods that we may not have otherwise understood. Aurélie Godet makes a strong claim for the value of festive studies, arguing that to interrogate a festive practice is to use it as "a window on cultural and societal change" (4). Studying festivity both sheds light on a particular form of sociability and enriches knowledge about the society in which it occurs (4).

However, the party does pose significant methodological challenges to researchers in festive studies. Parties are frequently informal, unstructured events, liminal and fleeting—difficult to effectively and meaningfully capture. Adding the passage of time to this makes the task all the more daunting: how then can one conceive of the festive practices of a particular period? This is where literature offers a unique insight into the nature of this type of festivity; it documents gatherings of this nature in a way that sociological and anthropological approaches cannot and locates the felt experiences of party-going in a given historical or cultural context. The highly flexible and fluid nature of parties means it would

be both a significant (and potentially mistaken) challenge to attempt a taxonomy of the modern party using a sole critical theory. An analysis of parties needs to both acknowledge the party's status as a distinctive event and recognise the importance of the elements that comprise festivities – elements that are frequently historically and culturally specific and require contextualisation in order to disclose their full meaning. A reading of the party in such a way – attentive to its material, social, and spatial elements, attuned to its impacts upon the individual, and grounded in cultural history – reveals the nature of the party consciousness.

People, Places, Things

Ahmed's work is primarily concerned with bodies, spaces, and objects, and how we orientate ourselves to them. To be orientated, she suggests, entails perception: "what is perceived depends on where we are located, which gives us a certain take on things" (*Queer Phenomenology* 27). Ahmed's method of thinking about how exterior elements orientate the individual – and how this in turn shapes their ways of living and behaving – is a productive starting point for analysing parties. Moreover, McLoughlin confirms the centrality of objects and space to the party, arguing that a critical reading of the party participates in the recent material and spatial turns in new modernist studies and literary studies more broadly (18). If parties at their core are defined by their elements – such the types of dress, décor, and venue they require – materiality and spatiality become essential components to any examination of the party. However, parties also encourage specialised behaviour, interactions, and experiences on the part of their participants (whether host or guest), raising questions about sociality, subjectivity, and intersubjectivity. An approach to the party anchored in these interlinked and mutually informing concepts, I argue, leads to an analysis of festivity that is holistic yet comprehensive because it focuses specifically on

the qualities and elements that construct parties. Phenomenology and the concept of orientation are the underlying inspirations for my method, but thing theory, new cultural geography, and dramaturgical sociology are also key influences.

Being attuned to the materiality of the party – what Georg Simmel calls “the culture of things” (“Future” 101) – involves a rethinking of the relationship between subject and object. As Ahmed comments, phenomenology at its core orientates us towards things and thinks about “how they reveal themselves in the present” (*Queer Phenomenology* 39). However, she also calls for an approach beyond phenomenology by considering how things arrive there in the first place (39). Thing theory is concerned with this relationship: as Bill Brown observes, thing theory contemplates how things represent a “story of a changed relation to the human subject” (“Thing Theory” 4). “Thingness,” Brown writes, “amounts to a latency [...] and to an excess” (5). Thingness relies upon a “methodological fetishism,” a specific mode of thinking which considers how things “constitute,” “move,” or “threaten” the human subject (7). This methodological fetishism brings to the fore questions that other fetishisms (such as a fetishising of the subject) ignore: questions such as what work things perform, and how “the subject-object relation” operates in time and space (7).

Anthropologist Daniel Miller also calls scholars to embrace, rather than reject, the act of being “caught gazing at mere objects,” arguing that “dwelling upon the more mundane sensual and material qualities of the object” allows the unpacking of the “cultural lives and values that are objectified through these forms” (“Why” 9). For Ahmed, interrogating which particular objects someone is or is not orientated towards also “reveal[s] the direction we have taken in life” (*Queer Phenomenology* 32): how we live, behave, and interact with others.

Brown and Miller both challenge the established tendency to begin with the subject, asking instead what it would mean to begin with the thing (B. Brown, “Thing Theory” 7). For Brown, the study of things is centred around a critical question: “[h]ow are things and thingness used to think about the self?” (*Sense* 18). Human subjects need objects to help

“establish their sense of identity” (“Matter” 64). Objects serve as material evidence of culture: they mediate human relations (and humans also mediate object relations) and pass through systems that position them as meaningful or meaningless (62). As Miller notes, the academic study of material culture is entrenched in an “understanding and empathy through the study of what people do with objects, because that is the way the people that we study create a world of practice” (“Why” 19). “In short,” Miller argues, “we need to show how the things that people make, make people” (“Materiality” 38).

In order to fully unfurl how things make people, a reading of things should locate them within their contexts of production, circulation, and consumption. Judith Brown’s study of the relationship between glamour and modernism typifies the importance of recognising the historically and culturally specific meanings of things. Brown’s readings of the material symbols of glamour in the early twentieth century – cigarettes and cellophane – demonstrates how meanings change over time. Cigarettes, for instance, were “portals” to a glamorous lifestyle: as Brown illustrates, they were advertised as both a pleasure to consume (for the nicotine) and to be seen consuming (for the visual aesthetic [2]). While present-day consumers perceive cellophane as a cheap and everyday material, Brown illustrates that during its emergence in the early twentieth century it was “persistently linked with glamour,” used to wrap and package items such as fragrance and cigarettes (18).

An exploration of parties through their materiality is revealing. Take, for instance, the cocktail: an American invention that found sudden popularity with the British at the beginning of the 1920s. Given the cocktail’s transatlantic origins and its exotic combinations of liquor, it was repeatedly positioned popularly as emblematic of modernity. Celebrity chef Boulestin described it as “the most romantic expression of modern life, of post-war civilisation” (*What* 83), while *Vogue* columnist and cookbook writer A. H. Adair proclaimed it as “the perfect symbol” of what it means to be modern (84). Importantly, the cocktail was not only stylish but economical: offering a pragmatic way for cash-strapped households to

entertain, as they did not require the expensive domestic staff necessary for a sit-down dinner party (Burnett 174). The interwar press of the early 1920s was quick to engage with the cocktail as an emerging trend. A cartoon from *Punch* in 1922 indicates the cocktail's newness: a customer at a restaurant, expressing frustration at there being no soup available, asks instead for "a couple of cocktails" (figure 1.1). Apologetically, the "rustic" waitress replies: "we haven't any cocktail soup either," clearly missing the point. A flurry of letters to the editor and articles in the *Times* in July 1921 debated over whether the cocktail was a harmful or harmless addition to British society.² In the literature of the twenties and thirties, writers position the cocktail as undeniably modern but also use it to indicate frivolity. The vivid and eccentric personalities of Mitford's central characters in *Highland Fling* and *Christmas Pudding* are continually confirmed as they consume cocktails at festivities in art galleries, country houses, and London apartments. For Waugh's Bright Young People in *Vile Bodies*, anywhere and anytime is appropriate for a party, leading to them making and drinking cocktails around the hospital bed of the rapidly declining Agatha Runcible. In Benson's *Mapp and Lucia*, Quaint Irene is the only one to order a cocktail at an evening gathering, adding to her other modern characteristics, such as wearing trousers, socialism, and painting abstract nude portraits. Conversely, in Gibbons's *Cold Comfort Farm*, the protagonist Flora Poste's rejection of cocktails in favour of a cup of tea aligns with her more pragmatic and reserved approach to negotiating modern life. Repeatedly in interwar fiction, cocktails fall into the hands of (and are orientated towards) the young and the flighty.

² See, for instance: "Cocktail Habit"; "Cocktails"; and "Girl Cocktail Drinkers."



Customer. "WHAT! NO CLEAR SOUP? ANYWAY, GIVE US A COUPLE OF COCKTAILS."
Rustic Waitress. "SORRY, SIR, WE HAVEN'T ANY COCKTAIL SOUP EITHER."

Figure 1.1: J. H. Dowd, cartoon on cocktails, *Punch*, 6 December 1922, p. 547.
© J. H. Dowd / Topfoto.

To consider the role of nonhuman actors at parties yields the potential for rich and deep readings, readings that focalise the thingness of things such as clothing, furniture and décor, and food and drink. Tracing the impact of these things upon the self offers an insight into the feelings and experiences encountered at parties; illustrating the intricacies and complexities of what it means to attend and participate in a party. Moreover, it also charts how things impinge upon social interactions and relationships, and how they are used to gain advantage or assert dominance over others.

A focus on materiality calls to attention the spatiality of the party. Indeed, the spatiality of parties can transform the thingness of material things, changing their existing meanings or producing entirely new ones. As Doreen Massey argues, space is “one of the axes along which we experience and conceptualize the world” (251). Given the centrality of space to our understanding of human existence, then, it is essential in an analysis of the party to consider its spatiality: the places in which parties occur. Party space is somewhat paradoxical: it can be rigidly delimited at times, but can also be free from constraint. Party spaces complicate spatial boundaries, transgressing the binary of public and private. The possible settings for parties are almost endless: from living rooms and parlours, to dance halls and nightclubs, to gardens and paddocks and the streets. These settings are affected by temporality, with spaces oscillating between party and non-party space over time. The space in which a party takes place may be a setting frequently or solely used for festivity (such as dance halls or assembly rooms), or an everyday domestic interior that is continually repurposed and transformed (such as parlours and dining rooms, hotel rooms, or entire houses).

The fluidity of party space finds resonance with Henri Lefebvre’s theorisation of social space. Lefebvre calls for an approach to space that views it as being active rather than passive: to truly investigate space we need to think about how social relations produce and govern spaces (89). Space is not a static object: rather, it is a “set of relations between things”

(83). Social space is also capacious, with an “ambiguous continuity” that supersedes any visual boundaries such as walls or fences (87). There is an “unlimited multiplicity” of spaces, and spaces are continually overlapping with each other (86–87). As Andrew Thacker notes, Lefebvre’s notion of social space is recognisable for its fluidity and diversity, allowing an analysis of different scales of spatialities (59): from festivities that roam across the geography of an entire city or suburb to a single room. Like Lefebvre, Edward W. Soja positions space as inextricably linked to the social, arguing that “[t]o be alive is to participate in the social production of space” – a constantly evolving spatiality (90). Any theory of the social, then, must consider its spatial dimensions (92). Social life forms space but is also contingent on space, a relationship that Soja describes as a “socio-spatial dialectic” (98). Soja’s theory, with its acknowledgement of the socio-spatial dialectic, is part of the turn to new cultural geography, a movement that considers the complex and contested nature of spatiality, which is bound up in hierarchies of power, such as class, gender, and race.

New cultural geography is an active influence upon the study of leisure and tourism spaces, opening up the potential for a similar examination of party spaces. As Cara Aitchison points out, leisure spaces are sites of “continuous, dialectical struggles of power and resistance” among their “providers, users and mediators” (29). Beccy Watson and Aarti Ratna build upon this conceptualisation, arguing that leisure spaces are “negotiated, often contested and [...] created and experienced both individually and collectively” (72). Parties, as sites of leisure, are also subject to these conditions. David Crouch figures leisure as an encounter taking place not only between people but also “between people and space, amongst people as socialised and embodied objects” (1). Rather than understanding the relationship between space and leisure in empiricist terms – that is, where leisure is “located” – Crouch argues for viewing space as central to shaping the leisure experience itself (2). Leisure is a multi-faced practice characterised by its reflexivity and liminality (12). The liminality of leisure reconfigures everyday spaces, subjects, and representations, but

operates within “socialised constraints,” where the subject “bends, turns, lifts and moves in often awkward ways” (12). As Ahmed writes, how one is orientated towards objects also affects how they inhabit space (*Queer Phenomenology* 28).

The ways in which party space divides along lines of class is evident in the opening scenes of Mitford’s *Highland Fling*. For the young characters who live in London, sociability aligns with modern spaces: dinner at the Ritz, late nights in seedy nightclubs, and cocktail parties in flats. The struggle of the novel’s central couple, Walter and Sally Monteath, is having enough money to participate in these activities. Exemplary of the “poor aristocracy” of the interwar years, their joint income is only a thousand pounds a year – not nearly enough to maintain the highly social and luxurious lifestyle expected of them. These cosmopolitan places become essential signifiers of class for Walter and Sally because they do not possess unfettered access to other spaces with stronger aristocratic associations, such as a country estate. A night spent out on the town early in the novel establishes their bid for social status. Sally wears a “particularly exquisite” designer dress, and the couple go dancing at the glamorous Savoy before taking a series of taxis between various nightclubs, all of which have cover charges – a marker of exclusivity (25). But the evening itself is not a particularly enjoyable one. The first nightclub they encounter can only procure “nasty” coffee instead of alcohol, and the evening only goes downhill from there: the other clubs are “uncomfortable” and “positively suicidal,” with an “atmosphere of surface hilarity [...] calculated to destroy pleasure” (26–27). Nevertheless, Walter and Sally “valiantly [pretend] to enjoy themselves” (26). The entire experience lacks any festive cheer, but the very act of being seen in these places is a necessity for fitting in with their peers.

So even if the festive experience is negative, Walter and Sally continue partying, revealing their reliance on sociability to uphold their class status. However, while social mixing for the Bright Young People takes place in inner-London flats and nightclubs, they still cling to traditional spaces that signify more established structures. For instance, when

visiting her aunt and uncle – Lord and Lady Craigdalloch – at the House of Lords the day after their escapades, Sally is in raptures: “it just is one’s spiritual home [...] I’d really forgotten what a divine place it is” (32). Sally’s thoughts are not dissimilar to Lord Craigdalloch’s sentiments: “[o]ne has one’s duty, you know; born into a certain position and so forth” (39). The House of Lords is so “divine” to Sally because its class boundaries are sharply defined: it is a place that strictly includes and excludes based only on title and rank. The variety of spaces Walter and Sally visit in the span of just twenty-four hours reflects the historical Bright Young People’s traverses across London, which, according to Taylor, oscillated “between the smartest Society function and the thoroughly disreputable carouse” (66). Both the seedy nightclub and the Palace of Westminster validate Walter and Sally’s status, albeit in different ways.

Material objects and the places within which they appear are inherently social, a connection confirmed in Goffman’s dramaturgical analysis of social interaction, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). Goffman’s work demonstrates a clear interest in how spaces and objects intersect with and influence individuals and their interactions with others. Indeed, he often uses parties as examples to illustrate his points, demonstrating the theory’s applicability to modern festivities (84, 109, 124). *The Presentation of Self*’s central claim is that individuals continually attempt to craft an image of themselves, an appropriate front for a given social situation (26). These fronts operate on a continuum from being unconscious to being contrived and are mediated by social expectations, meaning performers attempt to present an idealised impression of themselves (28, 44). In order to do so, anything inconsistent with ideal standards – which may belong to society or the performer – must be concealed (50). Performances are not always individual; they can also require collusion (83), and can be institutionalised, creating a “collective representation” that establishes codes of behaviour for particular social situations (37). Parties exemplify this institutionalisation with their associated behaviours that become ritualised expectation.

A vital acknowledgement in Goffman's theory is that performances do not always go to plan: they can be disrupted and always carry the risk of failure (235–36). These disruptions have effect at various levels. At the surface level, the social interaction itself is affected: the interaction may become awkward, and its participants may feel confused about how to act (235). At a deeper level, these disruptions impact upon broader social structures: if repeated performances assure the audience of an individual's capacity, but they suddenly fail to reproduce this performance, it may impact their reputation (235). There is also an impact on the individual performer: a disruption in performance may discredit one's self-conception of their personality (236).

Goffman is interested in "regions and region behaviour" (109), making spatiality a central feature of self-presentation. Regions much like those of the stage constrain performance: the front region, where performance is required, and the back region, where one can safely step out of character (109–14). Party places, both in public and private spheres, are frequently constructed in relation to these regions. Particular rooms operate as front regions, such as dining rooms and halls, where socialisation demands a conscious self-presentation. Others are back regions, such as bedrooms and bathrooms, which are more removed from the pressures of social interaction, serving as an opportunity to escape. This is not a matter of an innately "true" (back region) and "false" (front region) self, but rather an acknowledgement that individuals continually shift between several fronts throughout a given social occasion. Moreover, front and back regions do not necessarily connote formal and informal behaviour (130).

While different spaces create different performances, materiality also impacts self-presentation. Goffman argues that setting, appearance, and manner fundamentally shape the presentation of fronts (32–35). The setting—including objects within a space such as furniture, décor, and their physical placement—acts as the performance's scenery and props (32). Appearance and manner are more specific to the individual performer, constituting the

elements and qualities that are directly associated with them – the “personal front” (34). This includes aspects such as age, gender, race, body language and posture, speech, size, and clothing. While appearance tells us of the performer’s social status, manner indicates how the performer will interact with others (35). Impression management, then, is also an opportunity to display or accumulate economic, cultural, and social capital. As Pierre Bourdieu writes, “[t]he social world is accumulated history” and the “distribution” of capital “represents the immanent structure of the social world” (46). Parties by their nature bring sociality to the fore, acting as part of the “continuous series of exchanges” in which social capital “is endlessly affirmed and reaffirmed” (52). Settings and personal fronts convey embodied and objectified forms of cultural capital, and thus grant different levels of status and power to a party’s participants.

Goffman’s theory explicitly acknowledges the fluid nature of sociality. Places oscillate between front and back regions depending on context (127), and while some elements of setting, appearance, and manner are specific to a particular moment, others are transferrable across a variety of social situations (40). Take, for example, hosting a dinner party at home: the host does not solely reserve the setting of the dining room for parties, but aspects of its décor (such as a formal table setting, or a particular set of crockery) may only be brought out for special occasions. The clothing worn by the host or hostess to the party would also be acceptable at a restaurant. The manner of the host or hostess depends on the other guests present: if it were a small, intimate gathering with close friends, they might be relaxed and carefree, but if less familiar guests that the host or hostess was trying to impress were in attendance, the tone could be more polite and formal.

These three aspects of the party – materiality, spatiality, and sociality – all feed into the subjectivity and intersubjectivity of embodied subjects. While Goffman bases his theory on the process of social interaction, he is also interested in questions surrounding consciousness and subjectivity. Rather than a conventional phenomenological

understanding of subjectivity (starting from the individual and working outwards), Goffman sees the “features of subjective and intersubjective conduct” as partly derived from the processes of social interaction (Dolezal 248; see also Goffman 86–87). According to Goffman, the self-as-character is not something innate; instead, it derives from “the whole scene of his action, being generated by that attribute of local events which renders them interpretable by witnesses” (244). While a well-performed scene may give the audience a sense that the self-as-character is the only self, this self is a “*product*,” not a “*cause*” of the scene itself (245). The self-as-performer, meanwhile, is formed out of both “psychobiological” attributes and social interaction (246).

While Ahmed and Goffman draw upon different theoretical backgrounds to make their claims, they are both interested in how social expectation fundamentally shapes behaviour and the self. Ahmed writes that when “turns [of orientation] are repeated over time, [...] bodies acquire the very shape of such direction” (*Queer Phenomenology* 15). At the core of Ahmed’s argument is the claim that orientations are not casual or random but rather organised and socially determined (158). While Goffman positions life as a constant shifting between fronts during different social interactions, a reading incorporating Ahmed adds nuance by suggesting orientations towards things, spaces, and other people determine how these fronts come to be constructed and performed in the first place.

Materiality, spatiality, and sociality determine how individuals orientate themselves at parties, and impacts upon their subsequent subjective experience and consciousness. Prevailing theories of festivity such as those of Bakhtin characterise festivity as a transgressive encounter. Conversely, my approach reserves making a judgement about there being a universal experience of festivity. When interrogating the people, places, and things central to parties, it becomes clear festivity creates different experiences for its hosts and guests. As such, in my analysis of the party, I embody the party consciousness. I place myself within the experience of a host or guest, looking around the room at everything

inside it to understand how these elements impact the human subject, and what experience this creates. An approach of this kind yields a flexible framework for reading festivity that can be applied to a variety of texts, whether grouped by form, genre, or period. This fluidity offers the potential to consider how different groups of texts have different sets of party tropes; tropes which in turn impact upon conventions of narrative structure, character, and plot. However, in order to interrogate parties in the British interwar comic novel, a consideration of why writers particularly favoured the comic mode to explore this form of sociability is also necessary.

Chapter 2

Comedy and the Interwar Party

“What kind of party?” Denham asked Audrey.

“Oh, the usual kind. Just standing about and talking.”

“Oh.” Denham had been to some of these, and did not care for them. She pondered for a minute.

“Why do people like them?” she inquired, anxious to learn, and to conduct herself well at the party.

“Oh, well, they’re just a way of meeting people,” Audrey explained.

A way of meeting people. Of course that was what it was. Like so many other occupations. It is so difficult to meet people in this life that one must contrive all kinds of ways of doing so. (68)

— Rose Macaulay, *Crewe Train* (1926).

In Rose Macaulay’s comedy of manners *Crewe Train* (1926), the protagonist Denham Dobie is whisked away from her relatively peaceful and entirely anti-social life in Andorra to London, where her wealthy relatives introduce her to fashionable society and its associated activities: attending plays, country house weekends, and, of course, parties. But for the individualistic Denham, the rigid fixity of London sociability is dull and transparent. Much of the novel’s comedy, as evidenced above, comes from Denham’s devastating and straightforward questions about these rituals, exposing how society unquestioningly adheres to such routines. While Denham’s sophisticated cousin, Audrey, enjoys evening parties because the evening is “the time for doing things,” Denham is wholly unconvinced: “why not go out somewhere, have a picnic or an adventure, instead of standing about and talking?” (69). For Denham, a fulfilled life comes only from following your desires (active

and pleasurable pursuits such as adventures), rather than following what is standard (the wearisome, passive task of standing about and talking).

The central section of the novel – titled “The Higher Life” – traces Denham’s experiences in London. In each chapter, she is introduced to a standard society experience after which the chapter is named, such as “Going to the Play,” “Giving a Party,” “Country Week-End,” and “Householding” (53, 68, 85, 177). These titles are not just descriptive, but instructional: they would not be out of place as labels for a regular magazine advice column or the sections in an etiquette manual. This instructional tone aligns with the novel’s primary concern, which is conventions, and how and why people conform to them. As the narrator describes, Denham’s “complete, disintegrating and shattering philosophy of living” is summarised in her explanation to her love interest, Arnold, that “[i]t’s such rot [...] doing things we don’t like doing because some one else does them” (193). Her frustration about these experiences is how contrived they are: that is, social interactions are not permitted to happen effortlessly or organically, and behaviour is regulated by expectations that emphasise politeness and principles over the freedom to socialise how and when you would like. Through Denham’s overt opposition to these social practices, *Crewe Train* critiques how subjects are conditioned by their society to follow certain patterns of activity and behaviour.

Macaulay’s novel – dedicated to “the Philistines, the barbarians, the unsociable, and those who do not care to take any trouble” – is just one of many British comic novels from the interwar years that interrogate how and why people conform to certain behaviours in their preparation for and attendance at parties. As Bergson famously theorised in *Laughter* (1900; English translation 1911), this very sort of unblinking adherence to structure generates comedy: “rigidity is the comic, and laughter is its corrective” (21). Following Bergson’s line of thought, parties are ripe targets for critique through the comic mode because they bring this type of rigidity to the fore – a rigidity that inhibits Bergson’s ideal of pure or full “elasticity and sociability” (21). Parties, according to Bergson and many interwar comic

novelists, can only become genuinely sociable events once society eliminates this rigidity and restores individual elasticity.

In a period dominated by parties, writers turned to comedy as a way to explore the implications and dynamics of sociability. The prevalence of the comic novel during the interwar years is not surprising given that it was, in a way, part of the era of the comic: as both Sara Crangle and James Nikopoulos observe, critical theories about comedy, humour, and laughter proliferated during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Crangle, *Prosaic Desires* 106; Nikopoulos 1). Alongside Bergson's *Laughter*, this body of work also includes Charles Baudelaire's "On the Essence of Laughter" (1855), Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883–85), Sigmund Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), Wyndham Lewis's "The Meaning of the Wild Body" (1927) and *Men Without Art* (1934), and André Breton's concept of *l'humour noir* in *Anthology of Black Humour* (1940). And yet, these theories demonstrate the wide-ranging and contested understandings of comedy (whether this is to assert superiority, provide relief, or undercut expectation), showing that comedy by no means had a coherently stable meaning in this period.

This chapter argues the comic mode became a dominant form for writers interested in parties because it provided a legitimised space to critique prevailing social norms and values. As the introduction has shown, changing forms and conceptions (as well as increased access) to leisure aided the party in becoming one of the most dominant and prominent forms of sociability in the interwar period. For interwar writers like Waugh, Gibbons, Mitford, and Benson, parties impacted upon their direct experience of the society they lived in. These writers used comedy as a mode to explore the nuances of this popular festive form and, more importantly, to question its ritual behaviours. After all, for something to become an object of comic critique, it first requires a certain level of visibility that makes it a convention within a society: as Simon Critchley argues, jokes are "*anti-rites*" which "mock, parody or deride the ritual practices of a given society" (5). Parties became a key focus for

British comic novelists because their inherent sociality invites – or indeed, demands – critique, something which is at the centre of the comic mode. This chapter examines theories of the comic and laughter, primarily based in Bergson's understanding of the comic. Through a survey of interwar novels that use comedy to scrutinise the party as a festive form, I argue that Bergson's thoughts on laughter encapsulate the very concerns novelists had about the party: how rigidity and convention inhibit modern sociability. Moreover, as my analysis demonstrates, this comic approach manifests not only in novels of the period but also in nonfiction about parties, confirming the centrality of and essential humour attributed to parties in the interwar consciousness.

In *Laughter*, Bergson points to how society as a whole – itself a “living being” – can become laughable through mechanical behaviour (44). Society is rigid when it becomes “inert or stereotyped, or simply ready-made” and its authentic nature is disguised (44). For Bergson, this mechanisation is particularly apparent in the “ceremonial side of social life,” which he believes always contains “a latent comic element [...] waiting for an opportunity to burst into full view” (44). “Ceremonies,” he suggests, “owe their seriousness to the fact that they are identified [...] with the serious object with which custom associates them, and when we isolate them in imagination, they forthwith lose their seriousness” (45). The ceremony's participants “give us the impression of puppets in motion” when they are isolated from their place within social life (46). Parties, in themselves a form of ceremony and built up by expectation, convention, and ritualised behaviour, are exemplary of this rigidity. This view is echoed in other theories pertinent to comedy that emphasise the role of festivity and ritual. In contrast to Bergson's corrective view, Bakhtin locates a type of “universal” yet “ambivalent” laughter as being at the centre of carnival, which “expresses the point of view of the whole world,” and is “directed at those who laugh” (*Rabelais* 11–12). Carnival laughter opposes the laughter of “pure satire” where the satirist “places himself above the object of his mockery” (12). Conversely, George A. Test shows how satire's roots come from ritual,

arguing that ritual allows for “the aggression of satire” to be “expressed in a socially countenanced way” (23), echoing Girard’s emphasis on ritual violence in his theory of the sacred and aligning more closely with Bergson’s emphasis on asserting superiority.

Comedy is inherently social as it is a mode primarily concerned with the observation of human behaviour; as Erica Brown notes, comedy is a way for writers to critique their societies (15). Comedy aims to correct views and behaviours that do not conform to society’s expectations. Parties, by their nature, are social gatherings, and their prominence and prevalence meant they became an ideal focus for commentary upon how individuals in society behave and conform to certain expectations. The writers at the centre of the thesis all use the party as a venue for comedy in order to actively critique specific people, behaviours, concepts, and ideologies. As Emily Toth argues, humour attacks or subverts “the deliberate choices people make: hypocrisies, affectations, mindless following of social expectations” (783). Bergson agrees, contending that laughter from the comic is not unadulterated; instead, it intends “to humiliate, and consequently to correct” (136). Susan Purdie provides a similar perspective, arguing that texts such as the comic novel “affirm what constitutes as ‘proper’ performance on those sites their plots negotiate,” and work to establish these proper conventions as internalised norms (98). Laughter, Purdie argues, signifies those who do not adhere to norms as other, and aligns audiences with proper convention (98).

Despite the potential for comic texts to critique those behaviours deemed out of place, they occupy a somewhat awkward position in the study of twentieth-century literature. While there has been increased scholarly interest in twentieth-century literary humour since the turn of the last century, these discussions have predominately tended towards modes and methods thought of as formally experimental (and thus readily co-

opted into modernist canons).¹ Kate Macdonald argues comic fiction is broadly still seen as “not academically respectable” unless written by canonical authors “who transcend genre and can lend greatness to their humour,” giving the examples of Charles Dickens and Rudyard Kipling (145). Comedy is maligned because it cannot possess universal appeal due to the highly social nature of the mode and the historical specificity of jokes. In addition, the Aristotelian values that have shaped literary studies and its canons reinforce simplistic structures that align the tragic and serious with the high and the comic and playful with the low. There is a gendered element at play, too. Nick Turner describes the canon of the comic novel as overwhelmingly masculine: it is “seen to begin with Sterne and Smollett and continue via Dickens to Evelyn Waugh, Anthony Powell and Kingsley Amis, with Jane Austen treated, perhaps, as an honorary man” (5). As feminist critics such as Regina Barreca have argued, literary canons have long positioned women’s comedy as gentle and trifling, ignoring its dark and subversive qualities (20). In terms of early twentieth-century writing, Sophie Blanch has pointed to how criticism has particularly neglected women’s comedy in a bid to “ensure that women’s contributions to Modernism are taken ‘seriously’” (112). This resistance to engage with the comic works of the period is perhaps also in part due to the anxiety surrounding comedy as a mode more broadly, particularly as “humorlessness is on the rise” in the present era (Berlant and Ngai 240). As Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai observe, comedy attracts more debate about what it is or is not more than any other mode or genre (242).

¹ See: Colletta; Greenberg; Nieland, *Feeling Modern*; and T. Miller, *Late Modernism*. As Laura Mooneyham argues, comedy is only “tolerable” to modernism when it is presented “in the hybrid modes of absurdist or black comedy, tragicomedy, and the like” because of modernism’s aversion to “stable, desirable ends” (118).

The indeterminacy of what constitutes the comical is perhaps, in part, due to the vast number of critical theories that attempt to describe its qualities. Scholars typically sort theories of the comic into one of three categories: the superiority theory, the incongruous theory, and the relief theory. Three fundamental observations of the comic frame Bergson's *Laughter*, which combines both superiority and incongruity. Firstly, the comic is human: while nonhuman objects can be laughable, it is because we find within them some human-like quality (3). Laughter requires indifference and is usually accompanied by an "*absence of feeling*" (4). Bergson also asserts that "laughter is always the laughter of a group" (6). The natural environment of laughter is society, and laughter's function is predominately social (7–8). For Bergson, the central image of laughter is "something mechanical encrusted on something living" (57): that is, detecting an automatic or rigid quality within someone provokes laughter from others. Importantly, rigidity can come from just "one side" of the individual's character that they are unaware of: "on that account alone does he make us laugh" (146). In this sense, even those with the most conscious of social fronts, to borrow from Goffman, can be rendered mechanical and therefore laughable. A highly theatrical person who is aware of their performance – such as one of the characters in Benson's Mapp and Lucia series, for instance – can still be comic and the object of laughter because they remain unaware of the ridiculousness of the qualities of the performance itself. Anything that is somewhat disguised by mechanised behaviour is comic: from the individual to society and the nonhuman (42).

Like Bergson, Lewis's critical writings emphasise the connection between mechanisation and laughter. But Bergson's emphasis on the humanness of comedy is a direct contrast with Lewis, who insists *inhumanity* is central to generating comedy and laughter, proclaiming "the greatest satire is non-moral" (*Men* 103). Rather than seeing satire as "a work of edification" that seeks to reform and uphold morals, Lewis promotes a "non-ethical satire" (106–07). Lewis's idea of "[p]erfect laughter" is one where it is "inhuman" and

targets the physical body: the grotesque, the clumsy, the injured and diseased (112). Satirical characters, Lewis argues, are “*machines, governed by routine*” (113). While for Lewis, this mechanical quality is physical (“the glaring mechanical imperfections” [114]), for Bergson it extends into all aspects of being (such as the mental and the social). For Lewis, it is impossible to correct the mechanisation of being back to the free-flowing individual and social that Bergson describes.

Bergson’s emphasis on the automatism of individuals and society, as Lisa Colletta has noted, “reveals a profound anxiety about the increasing mechanization of life” brought on by modernity (19). While some writers and thinkers saw the potential for habit and automation to be generative (particularly the work of pragmatists such as William James and John Dewey), Bergson was not alone in his concern about the stultifying potential of automation upon the human subject.² As Timothy Wientzen points out, “twentieth-century life could be defined above all by the welter of cultural forces that [...] produc[ed] habitual, docile subjects” (49). Walter Pater proclaims in *The Renaissance* (1873) that “our failure is to form habits” (236), while Lewis in *The Art of Being Ruled* (1926) suggests “the machinery of education, the press, cinema, wireless, and social environment” gives society “a system of habits” that he likens to a “coma” (38). But the most prominent commentary on mechanisation is Walter Benjamin’s work on authenticity and aura in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1935). As Benjamin argues, mechanical reproduction results in a “wither[ing]” of the work of art’s “aura,” which describes the history and tradition that gives the work authority (51). This process allows for the politicisation of art, something with the potential for both positive and negative change (53). For Colletta, who

² For more on modernism’s positive engagement with habit, see Schoenbach. Bergson has sometimes been aligned with pragmatism himself through his influence on and friendship with William James. For an effective rebuttal against Bergson as a pragmatist, see Allen.

examines British dark humour and satire, the destruction of aura is “profoundly traumatic for the individual, who is unmoored from stable, historical and cultural conceptions of value” (20). Across their variety of forms, parties in interwar comic novels negotiate these tensions surrounding automatic behaviour, exploring how mechanisation could impact humorously upon sociability.

However, Colletta moves away from a Bergsonian sense of mechanisation to argue that the mechanical is less encrusted on the living and instead more a “primary characteristic of social organization” (19). The individual who laughs at the mechanical, according to Colletta, is mechanical themselves, fundamentally disrupting the individual’s corrective role within Bergson’s theory (19). Such a view “opens a way for examining a new, darker, form of social satire” where “the focus of the comedy is now the rigid and mechanical ordering of society” and individuals and society are in conflict regarding their goals (19). For Colletta, comedy is not a mode that corrects individual behaviour, but one that “reveals the way complex individuals negotiate the various roles they perform within the social structure” (19). But the corrective function of comedy is more complex and nuanced than Colletta accounts for. For Bergson, the goal of laughter is to jolt the mechanised being back to consciousness: for the subject to become aware of their automatism. The purpose of this shock is to promote “the greatest possible degree of elasticity and sociability” (21). The ideal living body is “the perfection of suppleness” and possesses “a constantly alert attention that discerns the outlines of the present situation” (49, 18). Inattention and obliviousness create “unsociability,” inhibiting the full elasticity of society by the individual “neglect[ing] to look around” (147). One might think that Bergson’s advocacy for flexibility is naïve, even utopian: granting such a degree of freedom to individuals has the propensity for chaos. But Bergson’s version of suppleness is tied to a “common centre round which society gravitates,” suggesting that it is always somewhat bounded (19). “By laughter,” Bergson continues, “society avenges itself for the liberties

taken with it" (197). As Jan Walsh Hokenson notes, mechanical behaviour is not a violation of specific social conventions but of sociability as a whole (43): in Bergson's theory, "society needs the comic in order to become [...] civilization" (47). Bergson's version of laughter, then, uses destruction and disruption in order to attempt to reconfigure society to an ideal standard.

The writers studied here each use comedy not to correct society back to its existing state or status quo, but to their idea of what society's standard should be. This corrective is achieved through the relationship between author, text, and reader, echoing Freud's theory of joke-work. In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud acknowledges the deeply social aspect of humour, although he positions laughter as primarily a form of relief. Freud splits jokes into two types: tendentious and non-tendentious (132). Tendentious jokes give a space to "exploit something ridiculous in our enemy which we could not, on account of obstacles in the way, bring forward openly or consciously" (147), meaning they are particularly favoured for criticising others (149). Freud is most interested in how these tendentious jokes work, suggesting they require three people: one who makes the joke, one who is the object or butt of the joke, and one who listens to the joke and subsequently fulfils the joke's aim of producing pleasure (143). In a later essay titled "Humour," Freud extends this model to written works: the author or narrator makes the joke about "the behaviour of real or imaginary people," and the reader of the text is the listener (161). Like Bergson, then, Freud emphasises the relationality of comedy: it needs an audience to be funny. However, Freud has little to say on how joke-work impacts the deliverer or butt of the joke, or the ramifications the joke has on broader social interaction and society itself. But from Bergson's perspective, laughter corrects society back to its free-flowing and effervescent self. The laughter and the critique that the comic novel produces thereby enact the author's attitudes and expectations surrounding proper sociability. Representations of parties in comic novels thus reveal the author's collection of idealised behaviours, standards, conventions, and

rituals, and are an opportunity to expand our understanding of interwar attitudes towards festivity.

Comedy is “the *only* one of all the arts that aims at the general”: while tragedy is concerned with individuals, comedy concerns itself with “classes” of people (Bergson 149, 165). As such, comedy portrays characters “we have already come across and shall meet with again,” aiming to “plac[e] types before our eyes” (163). The pinnacle of this display of types, according to Bergson, is for the spectator (in this context, the novelist) to show “several different copies of the same model” (165). Comedy, then, becomes “a game that imitates life” and is “far more like real life than a drama” (69, 136). Bergson’s focus on previously encountered types suggests an interest in the effect of proximity on the comic, an area which Berlant and Ngai argue demands more attention in the study of comedy (248).³ While theories of the comic tend towards affirming the centrality of detachment in producing comedy, comedy also places “things [...] near each other in a way that prompts a disturbance in the air” (248). Parties in comic novels engage with proximity in multiple ways: the universality and familiarity of the form generate proximity for author and reader, while inside the text, the party as a type of sociability allows for more intimate interaction between its participants, giving rise to more opportunity for comic interaction. Looking at the party as an occasion of proximity emphasises the centrality of human behaviour to comedic critique. But while Bergson advocates for proximity as a key principle of comedy, he also points to the importance of detachment. He writes that “laughter has no greater foe than emotion” (4), gesturing to the affective distancing required to generate humour. And yet, as Justus Nieland points out, laughter is pure embodied affect, “an inescapably

³ Berlant and Ngai’s dual emphasis on both detachment and proximity finds a corollary in satire theory, in which the object is made satirical by either its magnification through exaggeration or its minimisation through understatement.

corporeal phenomenon" ("Modernism's Laughter" 82). Comedy and laughter are structured by the very incongruities they identify as central to their creation. The comic novelist oscillates between these distances in order to create a successful critique: close enough to observe and understand, far away enough to make the critique have full effect.

While my focus is on how interwar comic novelists use comedy to critique social interaction and ritual, comedy is also used to assert political power. Comedy is frequently theorised as providing relief from anxiety, but it often produces it instead (Berlant and Ngai 233). As Colletta observes, comedy in the vein of the superiority theory is "the language of power," and has long been used to make marginalised and minority groups the target of the joke (18). The writers at the centre of this study all used comedy in this way to some extent: Waugh's depiction of indigenous South Americans, Mitford's use of racist slang, Gibbons's anti-Semitism, and Benson's reduction of servants to nothing more than stock characters in farcical side plots. Joke-work, as Jonathan Greenberg points out, is particularly "volatile" in writing of this period (13). Similarly, for James F. English, comedy is "a form of symbolic violence" (9). As such, understanding a comic text's politics demands a consideration of what joke-work "it performs or enables" (16). This thesis, while not excusing or protecting these authors from the volatility of their jokes, concurs with English's view.

Bergson's emphasis on mechanised behaviour and the potential for free sociability helps to analyse how writers turned to comedy as a mode for exploring the party. Repeatedly in the British interwar comic novel, parties show the implications of being both in and out of step with society's expectations. Comic incongruity, as English argues, arises from humour being inserted "into a scene of social relations [...] marked by various lines of tension and strain" (8). The party, as a microcosm of society, is an ideal site to concentrate and analyse these very tensions and strains. As English continues, "there are no jokes in paradise" because they emerge out of the contradictions that structure society (9). The interwar comic novel navigates concerns about mechanical behaviour in several ways: from

remarkable parties being rendered completely mundane, people becoming solely constituted by the parties they attend, stylistic choices revealing stultifying sociability, and social fronts inhibiting the pleasurable affects associated with party-going.

The subsequent paragraphs offer a brief overview of how comic novels, as well as comically flavoured nonfiction, engaged with the party in the interwar period. While the scope and methodology of this thesis only allows for detailed analysis of twelve novels across the following chapters, this survey demonstrates the pervasiveness of the party consciousness in these sorts of texts. My analysis deliberately focuses on writers and works regularly left out of discussions of early twentieth-century writing. While parties do feature in some of the period's most well-known satirical works – the country house party that forms the backdrop for Aldous Huxley's *Crome Yellow* (1921) or Lord Osmund's Lenten Party in Lewis's *The Apes of God* (1930), for instance – I want to use this chapter as an opportunity to showcase some of the lesser-known texts featuring parties. This survey aims to achieve a richer literary and cultural history of the interwar period, continuing some of the vital recovery work begun by scholars of twentieth-century writing, such as Bluemel, Humble, and Macdonald.

Early interwar comic novels emphasise the relationship between sociability and subjectivity. As Ahmed argues, “[g]atherings are not neutral, but directive” meaning that “[i]n gathering we may be required to follow specific lines” (“Orientations” 555). Goffman similarly suggests that “daily life is enmeshed in moral lines of discrimination,” pointing to how sociability is entrenched in assumption (242). Parties thus come to define and constitute the human subject, which is made and understood by others through parties. This plays out in Elizabeth von Arnim's 1922 bestseller *The Enchanted April*, in which the central character, Mrs Wilkins, is described as “the kind of person who is not noticed at parties,” because her clothes – which are “infested by thrift” – render her “practically invisible,” and “her face was non-arresting; her conversation was reluctant; she was shy” (3–4). For Mrs Wilkins, this

means her identity ceases to exist entirely: “[a]nd if one’s clothes and face and conversation are all negligible, [...] what, at parties, is there left of one?” (4). According to this text, parties are so ubiquitous that they come to define the worth of the subject wholly. It is only when Mrs Wilkins proposes the plan of renting a villa for the summer in Italy to Mrs Arbuthnot that her self is reconstituted, with her expression “as luminous and tremulous [...] as water in sunlight” (10). As the narrator describes, “[a]t this moment, if she had been at a party, Mrs Wilkins would have been looked at with interest” (10). Failing to fit into dominant modes of appearance and behaviour makes one invisible while following these modes too closely leads to mechanisation. It is only through effervescence, von Arnim suggests, that one can become genuinely noteworthy at parties.⁴

The self is again at the centre of the parties in Beverley Nichols’s *Crazy Pavements* (1927), a novel that satirises the Bright Young People much in the same vein as Mitford’s *Highland Fling* and *Christmas Pudding* and Waugh’s *Vile Bodies*. The idea that the self is hiding behind a mask of rigidity is a strong emphasis in Bergson’s work. For Goffman, too, social fronts are a type of mask, although they do not necessarily connote an inherently “true” or “false” self (245). In *Crazy Pavements*, parties force individuals to display social fronts that strip away the enjoyment of festivity altogether. The novel follows Brian Elme, who is swept into the Bright Young People’s world, and shows how party-going distorts and prevents genuine interaction. Brian’s love interest, Lady Julia Cressey, sees “a single gap in her engagement-book [...] as something sinister and horrible” (27), and only decides to strike up her relationship with Brian as a “refuge against *ennui*” (60). *Ennui* is a common descriptor throughout the novel: one of the first parties Brian attends is likened to “a ridiculous parade of the wooden soldiers [...] in thrall to the discipline of *ennui*” (52). While

⁴ As Chapter 4 shows, Gibbons echoes this sentiment in her novels by parsing parties as opportunities for positive transformation.

the experience is “unpleasant,” “[o]ne came because one didn’t wish to think” (52), gesturing to the way modern party-going at its extremes can completely obliterate individual subjectivity. The hobby of one of the partygoers, Lord William Motley, gestures to this notion: in his spare time, he carves masks. Lord William’s masks are his “criticism of life” and “generalizations of types that are running about London to-day” but he also makes masks of his friends (66–67) – a literalisation of Bergson’s claim that comedy presents us with “several different copies of the same model” (165). When Brian sees the masks for the first time, he finds them truly grotesque:

It was though he had suddenly intruded upon a party of all his new acquaintances and had found them struck with some mortal plague. In the thin greenish light he discerned the face of Lady Thane, wrinkled and decayed, and by her side a coarse, brutal caricature of Lady Jane. A thin-lipped, frowning Maurice stared at him from a bracket near the roof, and a sallow, puffed-out Tanagra Guest [...] gazed white and blank from the only table. (67)

The gory scene, however, soon manifests into reality in the novel, at a themed party where guests dress up as children and become indistinguishable from each other. Brian observes in horror how the guests “*really were becoming children*” and “[t]he game had turned to [...] [a] warped, misshapen reality,” where “they had forgotten their adult restraint and that old passions were creeping out under a mask of innocence” (121). Brian himself comes to place a mask over his true existence through his participation in the Bright Young People’s party-going culture, something which leaves him “spoiled in body and soul” (203–04).

Mechanised behaviour is expressed through form in novels such as E. M. Delafield’s *Diary of a Provincial Lady* (1930), a witty account of the day-to-day activities of a struggling upper-middle-class housewife in the countryside. The diary format and first-person narration of Delafield’s novel generate its comedy. The self-reflexivity of the diary entries alongside their nature as extremely personal documents ultimately produce a narrative that

is hyperaware of the party consciousness and society's habits. For instance, at a dinner party held by the socially superior Lady Boxe, the Provincial Lady comments particularly on the topic of conversation at the table; namely, a discussion of books. The diary points to the mechanical way dinner party talk is constructed, with each talking point merely a step in a sequence: "[w]e all say (a) that we have read *The Good Companions*, (b) that it is a very *long* book, (c) that it was chosen by the Book of the Month Club in America [...] and (d) that American sales are What Really Count" (12). A discussion of another book follows in precisely the same format. The Provincial Lady's parenthetical queries and memos in her diary emphasise how party behaviour often takes place without any pure reflexive thought behind it. At the same party, a conversation with another guest begins with "Jamaica, where neither of us has ever been," before moving to "stag-hunting," then "homeopathy" (13). This causes the Provincial Lady to reflect later: "(*Mem.*: Interesting, if time permitted, to trace train of thought leading on from one topic to another. Second, and most disquieting idea: perhaps no such train of thought exists.)" (13). That having no train of thought is "disquieting" points to the genuine concern that conversation has become a fully automated process. This "gentle exposure" of social pretension and snobbery by Delafield, according to Humble, is evidence of the novel's middlebrow qualities (*Feminine Middlebrow Novel* 29), a concept I engage with in my analysis of Gibbons in Chapter 4. As Kristin Ewins argues, both Delafield and Gibbons use satire to simultaneously expose "the cultural ignorance of pretty much all classes" while "celebrating the vigour, creativity and drive of middle-class women" (61). Middlebrow writers such as Delafield and Gibbons use comedy as a vehicle for promoting a middle-ground, common-sense approach to sociability.

Several novels of the early 1930s – such as those by Mitford and Waugh listed above – feature parties that become increasingly absurd and ostentatious, but fail to trigger an organic response from their participants. For example, the series of riotous parties in Anthony Powell's *Afternoon Men* (1931) culminates in a house party in the country, which

shows even the most severe and tragic events fail to shake its participants. After discovering an affair between his would-be fiancé and his best friend, the party's host, Raymond Pringle, attempts suicide by drowning himself in the sea. The guests only discover what has happened after finding a letter at the dining table as they sit down to lunch, but do not immediately know how to react, with one guest suggesting "[i]t's just his inferiority complex coming out" (187). What follows is a circular discussion amongst the guests as to whether they should eat lunch before they set out to look for Pringle, showing their inability to process information logically. As the day progresses, "it was easier to become accustomed to the idea of Pringle's suicide" (192), and the group continues their usual activities: talking, reading, walking. However, in the afternoon, Pringle returns alive: the protagonist, William Atwater, finds him standing in the dining room. Tellingly, Atwater "was not wholly surprised to see Pringle," and merely wonders instead why he is dressed in "a fisherman's jumper, corduroy trousers, and wading-boots" (196). In the same way, the rest of the group show neither relief nor shock at the news: Pringle's love interest, for example, chastises him for being an "old silly" instead of displaying any real concern about his wellbeing (198). The novel ends with the characters heading to yet another party in London, and there is little sense that they have changed for the better throughout the narrative's progression. While the material and spatial elements of parties change throughout the novel – such as the move from city to country and back again – they continually fail to make an impression on the subjectivity of the characters. As Colletta argues, *Afternoon Men* is "a comedy of melancholy" which produces its humour from its "representation of banality, triviality, and inaction" (105–06). In doing so, Powell's novel manipulates the conventions of comedy as theorised by Bergson to produce a darker version of comedy. In its depiction of mechanisation, *Afternoon Men* makes its reader laugh. But Powell's characters are never jolted back to elasticity, leaving the reader to assume the characters will continue the same mechanical behaviours beyond the conclusion of the narrative.

Similarly, in Winifred Holtby's *Mandoa, Mandoa!* (1933), a satirical novel centred upon a fictional African state's attempts to modernise itself, parties – as emblems of modernity – do not offer the characters any satisfying release. No stimuli, no matter how grand, has any effect. The novel's first party, held on the top storey "of an immense Oxford Street emporium" in London (31), is extravagant. Its attendees are "a voluble and vivacious company" who "swayed, pushed or gyrated" to the live band, with special guests including the Aga Khan, Charlie Chaplin, and "a boxing kangaroo" (31–32). The buffet room tables are "laden with chicken, galantines, jellies, pâté de foie gras, truffles, vols-au-vents, trifles and champagne" (32). Sir Joseph Prince, the chairman of a tourism company, is barely affected by any of this: the extraordinary becomes completely ordinary as he skilfully and calmly finds his young companion for the evening a chair, food, and a glass of champagne. As his date tells him, Sir Joseph is "a lovely person at parties," because he "always know[s] what to do," something he credits to years of "practice" (32). Being well practised in the art of parties renders him mechanical, unable to process the sheer scale of the celebration.

Later, when the action moves to Mandoa – where the Lord High Chamberlain, Safi Talal, is attempting to change his country's ways after a visit to Addis Ababa, "a civilisation enriched by baths and cocktail shakers" (20) – these markers of modernity again become entirely standard. Once Sir Joseph's company helps Talal realise his project, Talal is dismayed to find that Western tourists find the new Mandoa, with its "gramophones" and "cocktail shakers," to be too much like home (209). As one of the visitors tells Talal, "[t]his new fashion for Mandoa is partly [...] the outcome of our fatigue with just these instruments of pleasure that you desire. We want to return to that simplicity that you find so tiresome" (277). The hotel and ballroom, newly built to accommodate Western sociability, "were not what Europeans and Americans wanted" (280). Instead of conventional Western parties, the tourists – desiring exotic experiences in colonial outposts – want what they think is an

authentic vision of African savagery.⁵ Deprived of novelty, Mandoa's visitors take on a blasé attitude akin to that of the city resident in Simmel's "The Metropolis and Mental Life" to cope with the never-ending shocks that characterise modernity (178), resulting in an "ennui of existence" (Holtby 278).

Novels published in the late interwar years, such as Stevie Smith's 1936 *Novel on Yellow Paper*, both grant parties the capacity to measure their participants' social worth and offer a more critical and self-reflexive view of the party consciousness and the routines of sociability. In *Novel on Yellow Paper*, this dual view of parties emerges through its unconventional form and style. For instance, the eccentric heroine, Pompey Casmilus, supplies the reader at various points throughout the novel with lists of her favourite quotations. These quotations, according to Pompey, are for one's "scrap book," and for "shoot[ing] them at your friends at high-class parties" in order to elevate their esteem of you (42). However, Pompey's narrative voice is heavily inflected with sarcasm and wit, pointing to the inauthenticity of such methods of attaining cultural capital. Pompey's critique is compounded by the quotations themselves: listed first in the notebook and then intended to be recited again and again, they are a type of repetition. The questioning of social behaviour continues later in the novel as Pompey muses upon the ramifications of poor behaviour at parties concerning young women drinking Black Velvet cocktails (73). Here, Pompey's refusal to subscribe to expectation – like Denham in Macaulay's *Crewe Train* – sets her on a different orientation to her peers. As Ahmed asserts, subjects orientate themselves towards both physical objects and "objects of thought, feeling, and judgment" (*Queer Phenomenology* 56). Pompey suggests if one is "given that cheap sweet champagne as happens at some twenty-firsts, [...] it might be a good thing to send the butler scratching round for a

⁵ I return to the concept of savagery in Chapters 3 and 4, in my discussion of Waugh's *A Handful of Dust* and Gibbons's *Cold Comfort Farm*.

Guinness" (73). However, this means "people might get set against you" and could potentially lead to being struck off the guest list of future festivities like weddings (73). But this, she reflects, could be more of a boon than a burden: not being asked to the wedding means "you wouldn't have to give a present," so all in all, "you'd be no worse off" (73). Pompey's eccentricity – both in her stream of consciousness style of writing and her unique perspectives on sociability – provides an outlet from her secretarial job, a position that is reliant on mechanisation and automation.

Ivy Compton-Burnett's *Daughters and Sons* (1937) likewise shows a self-referential awareness of parties and emphasises their capacity to entertain. *Daughters and Sons* focuses on the Ponsonby family: the elderly matriarch, Sabine; her son, John, who is a struggling novelist; her daughter, Hetta, who runs the household; and John's five children. *Daughters and Sons*'s narrative climax is a dinner party which brings several family secrets to the surface. As Crangle argues, "[t]he sounds mouths emit are integral to Compton-Burnett's prose," meaning "her interest in laughter is perhaps inevitable" ("Ivy Compton-Burnett" 99–100). In line with Compton-Burnett's characteristic style, *Daughters and Sons* is told almost exclusively through dialogue, making the representation of the dinner party notable for what it excludes: Compton-Burnett gives no detail about the elements that so frequently fill party scenes in other comic novels. Dialogue is thus the primary source of the novel's comedy, and its prominence in this scene, along with the continual use of "said" as a dialogue tag, places sociality at the forefront and emphasises the rigidity of the Ponsonbys' interactions. The qualities of Compton-Burnett's dialogue expose the narrative's fictionality, a move which highlights the repetitive structures of sociability that subjects experience. For instance, numerous family members comment throughout the evening that Sabine will die. Sabine herself compares the party to a "funeral," and when she comments that she hopes not to be alive by the time her youngest granddaughter is grown up, John's daughter France replies "[s]he will not, if her death is to be this evening" (267). Later, when Hetta suddenly

exposes the secrets being kept by other family members in a lengthy, furious outburst, Sabine dies—but none of her family realise, for they are transfixed by Hetta. Another strand of self-reflexive commentary comes from the Ponsonbys' guests, who voyeuristically and pleasurably watch these family dramas unfold. Early in the evening, one of the guests comments that "nothing is so amusing as family conversation! I have been regarding it as carried on for my express entertainment" (276). The guest aligns with the implied reader: because there is only dialogue to consume on the page, it is the very source of the novel's comedy. Like the guests, the reader regards the dialogue as being carried on for their express entertainment.⁶ As the guests leave following Sabine's death, one thanks the Ponsonbys for the party:

We have had a lovely evening; I mean, we have enjoyed it all so much; I mean, we have been so glad to be at your side through everything. And of course there has been nothing. Except, of course, that Mrs. Ponsonby's death has been everything.
(291)

Here, too, the guests are likened to the reader. While the evening, with its scandalous reveal and fatal conclusions, has been anything but "lovely" for the Ponsonbys, Compton-Burnett's dark comedy makes it enjoyable for the reader.

Nonfiction texts contain elements of comedy in their discussion of parties, reflecting the general ludicrousness of the forms of sociability that the modern subject is forced into. These texts recognise and undermine their own rigidity to comic effect. Ruth Lowinsky's *Lovely Food* (1931) and *More Lovely Food* (1935), for example, offer a series of lunch and dinner menus and recipes for highly specific (and often laughable) scenarios. Lowinsky's cookbooks are a curious blend of playfulness and earnestness: the imagined situation for

⁶ The idea of the self-reflexive comic novel as being entertainment about entertainment is extended in my analysis of Benson's Mapp and Lucia series in Chapter 6.

serving each menu is humorous or inflected with sarcasm, but the menus themselves are legitimate options for entertaining, and the books provide space for the hostess to log their festive successes (or failures). One menu in *More Lovely Food*, for instance, is designed for a “[d]inner to make one of your young men realise what he has missed by not availing himself of his chances of marrying you many years before” (132). This statement makes several assumptions about the hostess: she is married, but not a newlywed, and had several suitors during her youth. These sorts of scenarios invite the reader to imagine themselves into a particular persona – one that becomes comic through the imagined stickiness and absurdity of the state of affairs. Conversely, the next menu in the book does not supply the reader with any prefacing context or scenario, merely stating:

A book on etiquette written in 1890 tells us that certain dishes should be eaten with a fork in the right hand and a pusher made of bread in the left. Whether you eat your pusher or leave it neatly on the side of your plate determines the circle you move in. And then what? (137)

This final remark undermines all that comes before it, poking fun at how the previous century’s etiquette guides present simple actions as indicators determining one’s entire social worth. However, these tongue-in-cheek qualities contrast with the spaces supplied for the reader to reflect upon their practice of hospitality. Dotted lines are inserted after each menu for the cook or hostess to make notes, and a “Hostess’s Book” is included for the reader to record the parties they have hosted, with spaces to fill in the guests who attended, the dishes and alcohol served, what dress the hostess wore, what pastimes were played, and any additional necessary remarks (*Lovely Food* 100).

Rose Henniker Heaton’s *The Perfect Hostess* (1931) takes a sardonic approach to the qualms of modern entertaining. The book begins with a series of jovial poems focused on the “perfect” version of party participants: the “Hostess,” “Guest,” “Pest,” and “Host” (xi; see Chapter 3 for a more detailed discussion of guests as pests). The perfect hostess, for instance,

is one who “makes you feel when you arrive / How good it is to be alive” (ix), while the perfect pest is the guest who “merely sent a wire to say / That she was coming down to stay” (2). Like Lowinsky’s works, *The Perfect Hostess* offers the reader a chatty commentary on issues of entertaining, varying between highly specific scenarios unlikely to be encountered by the reader (“The Royal Academician will Dine at a Quarter to Eight”) and sage, practical advice that is more broadly applicable (“Simple Rules for Simple Servants”) (xii-xiii). Even the useful titbits of information are mediated by comic flavour, evidenced in the chapter on “The Awkward Pause” (119). When “*conversation is momentarily paralysed by some terrible gaucherie*,” Heaton suggests the hostess should “make a statement as far removed from ascertained facts as possible, so that everyone present feels impelled to contradict her” (119). But the list of examples supplied move from the realm of the untruthful to the ridiculous: from “[w]hat a pity it is that Westminster Abbey is to be pulled down to make the traffic easier” to “this plan of opening all the prisons and asylums next Sunday is a beautiful idea” (119). Works such as those by Heaton and Lowinsky illustrate how the association of parties with comedy is not contained merely within the pages of fiction; instead, it extends into a wide range of textual forms.

Bergson’s study concludes by way of a comparison between laughter and the sea. The waves on the sea’s surface “clash and collide,” and are capped by a “snow-white foam,” residual traces of which are washed up on a sandy beach (200). A child playing nearby spots the spray and gathers some in their hands, only to find it dissipates within moments into “brackish” and “bitter” droplets of water (200). “Laughter,” Bergson writes, “comes into being in the self-same fashion” as waves: it “indicates a slight revolt on the surface of social life” (200). It is a “froth” that “sparkles” and “is gaiety itself” (200). But like the sea foam, “the substance is scanty and the after-taste bitter” (200). Laughter may be pleasurable and corrective, but it also reveals discontent and aggrievement. The interwar comic novels surveyed here reflect this notion. While the comedy within these texts often appears to

possess this sparkling frothiness, underneath lies a scathing critique of social rigidity. As the analysis in this chapter has shown, and as the following chapters explicate in more detail, this critique manifests in a variety of ways. As evidenced through Waugh's views on hospitality, Gibbons's practical approach to self-improvement, Mitford's nostalgia for an imagined past, and Benson's interest in theatrical performance, writers of the interwar period used comedy to unpack the complexity of parties as a form of modern sociability.

Chapter 3

“The Age-Long Hostility of Host and Guest”: Evelyn Waugh and Hospitality

If Evelyn Waugh does not feel like writing a short story for *Harper's*, perhaps he would have time to do a short article, say “correct ingredients” for a cocktail party, a sherry party, or parties in general. Hostesses – intellectual, theatrical, would be artistic, and so forth. London cliques – artistic, literary, musical, social climbers, publicity seekers, etc. Private Views. Hobbies. First nights. The film premières.

It should be more or less a satirical, atmospheric article, and if he does not care for any of these subjects, perhaps he would think of something else. They are, I know, very general, and rather over done, but they might give him the lines on which I was thinking.

– P. Joyce Reynolds, letter to W. N. Roughead, 16 June 1933.¹

This letter from the general editor of British *Harper's Bazaar* to a partner at the literary agency representing Evelyn Waugh emphasises the centrality of parties and sociability to interwar sophisticated society. As Reynolds notes, the suggested topics for Waugh's article were commonplace in popular periodical culture: *Harper's Bazaar*, in particular, had regularly featured articles on entertaining since its launch in Britain in 1929.² The article that emerged in response to these suggestions was “Cocktail Hour,” published in the magazine in November 1933. Waugh's article expresses his disdainful attitudes towards modern entertaining and hospitality, centred upon the idea that there is an “age-long hostility” between “host and guest” (532). Waugh's choice use of the word “hostility” in “Cocktail Hour” is worth considering in more detail, particularly given its close etymology with

¹ Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin, A. D. Peters Collection, Correspondence Files, Box 139. My thanks to Naomi Milthorpe for supplying me with a copy of this correspondence.

² See, for example: Plunket and Stanley; Rodney; Lockwood.

“hospitality.” “Hospitality” derives from the Latin *hospes*, meaning both “host” and “guest,” but also referring to “stranger.” *Hospes*, meanwhile, originates from *hostis*, the stem word for terms such as “hostile” and “hostility.” It is because of this etymological tension that Jacques Derrida argues absolute hospitality – opening the home “to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other” – is impossible (“Foreigner Question” 25). There is always “an insoluble antimony” between “[t]he law of unlimited hospitality” and “the laws,” the “rights and duties that are always conditioned and conditional [...] across the family, civil society, and the State” (77). Even then, conditional hospitality also has a double edge: the capacity for host or guest to become unfamiliar and strange to each other in a single moment, for hospitality to become downright hostile.

This potential for unfriendliness, Waugh argues in “Cocktail Hour,” “should be remembered by anyone who is liable to the itch of hospitality,” as “[t]here is no more certain way of getting oneself disliked than by giving an occasional party” (532). For Waugh, hospitality may indeed be an itch, but it is not one that should necessarily be scratched. In particular, Waugh draws a clear line between who should and should not be hosting a party. Entertaining is only for those who have “definitely set yourself up as a host” because they belong to “a distinct category” (532). The real risk comes when those who have the “proper position as guests [...] start entertaining” (532). Waugh cycles through a range of consequences for the guest-turned-host: making “permanent and implacable enemies,” “earn[ing] contempt,” leaving friends “infuriated,” and potentially “being excluded” from future parties entirely (532). Stepping out of these existing structures, Waugh thereby suggests, has the propensity to attract ire and even ostracism.

Waugh’s claims here – that one is either a host or a guest – reaffirms a 1918 essay by fellow writer Max Beerbohm, whom Waugh deeply admired (Stannard, *Evelyn Waugh* 463). According to Beerbohm, each person has either “the active or positive instinct to offer hospitality, the negative or passive instinct to accept it” (128). But as Beerbohm

acknowledges, not everyone can be the ideal version of these two roles. The virtues of hosts and guests fall between two extremes: hospitality in its purest form is “midway between churlishness and mere ostentation” (143); the perfect guest, likewise, is between “the parasite” and “the churl” (145). Beerbohm’s repeated invocation of the “churl” – a term which in its original senses suggests lower social rank and poor breeding – points to the classed expectations placed upon both host and guest. For Beerbohm, good hospitality and a productive host/guest relationship rely upon good manners. Waugh echoed this sentiment in a 1956 article about Beerbohm, titled “Max Beerbohm: A Lesson in Manners.” In the article, he describes their first encounter in 1929, when they attended the same dinner party. Waugh was filled with anticipation for the event, describing Beerbohm as “an idol” (516). However, he did not get to talk to Beerbohm at length, making the evening a “disappointment” (517). Waugh was further deflated when he met Beerbohm by chance in a gentleman’s club the next day, only for Beerbohm to think he was someone else. However, Waugh later received an “enchanted document” from Beerbohm, apologising for the encounter and blaming his age and failing memory for the mistake (517). Beerbohm had read Waugh’s work “with pleasure,” and it was only travel abroad that prevented him from “seeking a further meeting” (517). “Good manners were not much respected in the late twenties,” Waugh writes, “[a]nd here from a remote and much better world came the voice of courtesy” (517). For Waugh, Beerbohm was the veritable emblem of disciplined behaviour, a reminder of what etiquette and decorum should look like.

The matter of hospitality echoes across much party-related material of the 1920s and 1930s, where it is repeatedly framed in instructive ways. As an act of sociality, the provision of hospitality was dominant within the party consciousness. Woodman’s 1925 *Foulsham’s Guest Entertainer*, for instance, begins with an explicatory chapter titled “What Are the Duties of Host and Hostess?” (9), while Boulestin suggests in the opening lines of *The Finer Cooking* (1937) that the propensity for the English to throw and attend parties is “laudable

because it shows a desire to entertain [...] in a hospitable manner" (1). Etiquette guides and advice manuals supply hints on being a good host and guest: *Modern Etiquette for Young People* (1938) by Olive Richards Landers offers six pages of tips on "How to Be a Delightful House Guest," as "[v]isiting in the home of another requires ready and constant tact" (105). June and Doris Langley Moore's *The Pleasure of Your Company* (1933) is subtitled *A Text-Book of Hospitality*, while other guides explicitly target and idealise the hostess, such as Heaton's *The Perfect Hostess* (1931) and Giovanni Quaglino's *The Complete Hostess* (1935). An article series titled "For the Hostess" was a regular feature in British *Vogue* in the early 1930s, providing commentary and advice on matters such as budget entertaining, the rules for serving wine, simple dishes for parties, and the art of mixing drinks.³

Waugh's interest in hospitality is not surprising in light of his religious beliefs: he converted to Catholicism in 1930. Hospitality is a virtue core to Christianity and its teachings, from Jesus's instruction to wash one another's feet (*The Holy Bible*, John 13.14–17) to the Last Judgement, where those who supply hospitality receive eternal life and those who do not are condemned to "eternal punishment" (Matt. 25.34–46). Hospitality, as James A. W. Heffernan argues, is thus "the sole determinant" of Christianity's evaluation of its subjects (9), because its principles embody other values such as empathy, humility, and kindness. But both pre- and post-conversion, Waugh regularly commented on matters of entertaining and sociability. He was a frequent partygoer himself, particularly during 1928–30, a period defined by his ill-fated marriage to Evelyn Gardner and his growing friendship with Bryan and Diana Guinness (sister of Mitford), some of the brightest of the Bright Young People. For instance, from 12 to 19 June 1930, Waugh documented attending four cocktail parties and four after-dinner parties, regularly attending more than one party in a day

³ See: "For the Hostess: Drinks"; "For the Hostess: Entertaining"; "For the Hostess: The Service of Wines"; and "Simple Dishes."

(*Diaries* 314–16). However, Waugh's attitudes towards parties were largely negative: entertaining often left him wholly disgruntled and disenchanted with the state of modern hospitality. In another article, he describes how hosting parties fills him "with despondency," leaving him to "look aghast down the table wondering why in the world I have brought this thing on myself" ("Such" 275). In staring down the table at those around him, Waugh implicates his guests in his guilt, pointing to the fundamental significance of the host/guest relationship. Genuine sociability at parties, for Waugh, is impeded by the degradation of the standards that structure festivity in the first place. As Ahmed writes, subjects "take shape through being orientated toward each other" (*Queer Phenomenology* 54), making the behaviour of both host and guest essential to a party's coherence and success. As Waugh observes in "Cocktail Hour," while the host is "a race to be despised and insulted and forgotten," they are also "a race fulfilling an important and on the whole useful function in life" (532). Waugh's valuing of festive structures relates to his literary project: his novels are emphatically interested in the relationship between order and disorder.

A recurrent theme in Waugh's essays and articles is the state of society and civilisation, which he frequently frames in binary terms: order on one side, complete catastrophe on the other. In a 1930 essay written to justify his conversion to Catholicism, Waugh is convinced of civilisation's decline, observing that "the whole moral and artistic organization of Europe" is under threat, which he attributes to a decline in faith and "the ideal of a materialistic, mechanized state" ("Converted" 367), a gesture towards Bergson's concerns regarding rigidity. Later articles, such "Fan-Fare," a 1946 essay regularly interpreted as an explanation of Waugh's satirical method (see Greenberg 7–8; McCartney 2; Milthorpe, *Evelyn Waugh's Satire* 2–3), maintain that society is continually under threat. "The artist's only service to the disintegrated society of today," Waugh writes, "is to create little independent systems of order of his own" ("Fan-Fare" 304). As Waugh's satire in the novels studied here reveals, hospitality itself is a system of order, one that can offer a path out of

chaos. This sentiment is echoed in “Manners and Morals,” a two-part article published in the *Daily Mail* in 1962 that frames the decline of hospitality as a moral failing. Waugh singles out hospitality as a means for maintaining society, claiming “ceremony and etiquette are the revolution against barbarism of peoples developing their civilization” and “the protection of those in decline” (“Manners” 592). He singles out the host, imploring them to exercise their control over others. There is a “mutual contempt” between “host and guest,” but “it is the host who holds power” (591). While Waugh’s novels revel in disaster and destruction, this disorder is a product of his satire, which advances moral judgement.

Waugh’s views on hospitality carry through actively to his interwar satirical works where the deterioration of the relationship between host and guest leads to a series of parties that are characterised by their disorder. Waugh is the most prominent British party novelist of the 1920s and 1930s: as Charlotte Charteris has argued, “[i]t is doubtful whether any English novelist [...] uses the word *party* as often as Waugh does during the interwar years” (125). This chapter focuses on three of Waugh’s earliest novels: *Decline and Fall* (1928), *Vile Bodies* (1930), and *A Handful of Dust* (1934). In these texts, hosts are regularly unenthusiastic, unwelcoming, lackadaisical, or absent altogether, and parties decidedly lack the restorative pleasure, liberation, and *communitas* described in theories of festivity. Waugh positions the relationship between host and guest as the central structuring logic of parties, defining their legitimacy and coherency. Waugh’s interwar novels suggest that without “systems of order” such as hospitality in place, the modern world and its forms of sociability are left to deteriorate into decadence.

Dynamic and Static: *Decline and Fall*

Waugh’s debut novel, *Decline and Fall*, is at its core concerned with the difference between “dynamic” and “static” people, a metaphor offered by one of the novel’s most eccentric

characters, the architect Otto Silenus (209). This has been a central area of focus for Wavian scholars reading the novel, including Robert Murray Davis, George McCartney, and Jerome Meckier (Davis, *Evelyn Waugh, Writer* 49; McCartney 16; Meckier, "Cycle" 62). Using Luna Park's wheel as an analogy, Otto suggests the naïve protagonist, Paul Pennyfeather, is the static type who somehow "got on to the wheel, and [...] got thrown off again at once" and would be much better suited to simply watching those on the wheel instead (209). People such as Otto, conversely, are dynamic and able to "cling on" to the wheel with all their might (209). This metaphor maps onto the novel's portrayal of hospitality: modern partying, as Waugh shows in the novel, is an entirely dynamic affair. The dynamic parties in *Decline and Fall* show that the traditional rules of sociability have been abandoned: party hosts are absent or possess devious motives, events are poorly planned, festive locales are un conducive to interaction, and the good are punished while the bad are rewarded. The novel's parties—annual dinners held by Oxford's Bollinger Club, a school sports carnival, and a weekend party at a modern country estate—are devoid of hospitality and convey the novel's concerns surrounding the lack of order and authority in modern society. In *Decline and Fall* (and indeed, all Waugh's novels), parties are not merely humorous episodes for decoration or atmosphere; rather, they are scenes integral to advancing plot and Waugh's satiric critique.

The novel follows Paul Pennyfeather, a studious and unassuming theology undergraduate, who is sent down from Oxford for indecent behaviour. Needing to make a living, he takes up a position as a schoolmaster at a boys' school in Wales, where he encounters the wealthy socialite Margot Beste-Chetwynde. Paul remains, however, unaware that Margot derives much of her income from several brothels in South America. The pair become engaged, only for Paul to be arrested and sentenced to several years in prison for human trafficking after blindly agreeing to help negotiate the passage of Margot's employees from Marseilles to Rio. Margot—who later marries a government official—

orchestrates Paul's escape from prison, and the novel ends as it begins, with Paul studying at Oxford.

The centrality of festivity to the narrative is apparent the moment the novel begins, as the rowdy Bollinger Club hold their annual dinner. The "beano" is characterised by the sound of "confused roaring" and "English county families baying for broken glass" (9-10). Pure destruction is the aim of the group, who gleefully wreck the belongings of the "unpopular" aesthete students (10). The chaos of this initial scene establishes the inherently backwards expectations and reactions that define dynamic sociability. The detached narrator describes the entire proceedings as "a lovely evening" (11), demarcating the event as a pleasurable time despite the violent, destructive tendencies of its participants. At the evening's close, Paul is caught up in the revelry and debagged by the club members. College staff see the incident, but they decide to not intervene on the basis of "avoid[ing] an *outrage*" (13). In a world bent on destruction and violence, what should be outrageous becomes entirely normal, and the act of kindly intervention transforms into an oddity. Later, the staff deem Paul's conduct as "unseemly" and "flagrantly indecent" and decide to expel him, despite witnessing the actual sequence of events (13). This instability of language is reminiscent of nonsense writing, a genre Waugh was fond of.⁴ Jean-Jacques Lecercle

⁴ When Waugh left London in early 1925 to take up a position as a schoolmaster at a private boys' school in Wales, he took a copy of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* with him (*Diaries* 199). As Humphrey Carpenter has noted, there are strong parallels between Carroll's protagonist and Paul in *Decline and Fall* (157). Waugh's interest in nonsense, however, continued beyond *Decline and Fall*: the epigraphs of *Vile Bodies* are excerpts from *Through the Looking Glass* and the surname of one of its characters, "Runcible," is taken from Edward Lear's 1870 poem "The Owl and the Pussycat." During his time as a sporadic book reviewer for the *Spectator* in the late 1930s, he reviewed a

emphasises nonsense's dialectic between order and disorder: it is "a conservative-revolutionary genre" (2), "structured by the contradiction [...] between over-structuring and destructuring" (3). At its core, nonsense "believes in the *centrality of language*" (68), and "[s]emantic nonsense illustrates the plasticity of meaning" (67): words can mean both everything and nothing at once. Because Paul's conduct is labelled as indecent through the speech act, he must be expelled; motivation or circumstance become irrelevant and cannot factor into the deans' judgement. That authority only rules upon what is explicitly named is echoed later in the novel during Paul's trial, where the narrator reports "Margot Beste-Chetwynde's name was not mentioned" in the proceedings, despite her orchestrating the crime (159). Here and in the Bollinger Club scene, Waugh destabilises and inverts meaning to advance his critique: as Jeffrey Heath argues, the novel shows how authority "encourage[s] the disorder it should be suppressing" (67).

Waugh's characterisation of the beano's attendees further establishes this sense of backwardness. As critics have noted, despite the aristocratic heritage of the Bollinger members, they are unrestrained, unruly barbarians (J. Heath 66; McCartney 8). Waugh's wordplay in his description of the members emphasises this point:

epileptic royalty from their villas of exile; uncouth peers from crumbling country seats; smooth young men of uncertain tastes from embassies and legations; illiterate lairds from wet granite hovels in the Highlands; ambitious young barristers and Conservative candidates torn from the London season and the indelicate advances of debutantes; all that was most sonorous of name and title was there for the beano. (9)

There is a certain readerly pleasure produced by this passage's cadence, with its repetition, alliteration, and assonance. The group are tagged with a series of less than desirable

biography of Lear and a new collected edition of Carroll's works (see "Carroll"; "A Victorian Escapist").

adjectives: they are “epileptic,” “uncouth,” “uncertain,” and “illiterate.” Waugh’s use of “sonorous” takes on a highly layered meaning: the group themselves are sonorous both through their aristocratic importance and their noisy “roaring,” but Waugh’s description is also sonorous through its textual euphony, pointing to the power of language to impose order on chaos. The opening pages of the novel thus establish that it is in words (that is, the novel’s form) where sense and meaning are to be found. It is in the world that Waugh depicts – the novel’s content – where chaos lies. This maps onto Waugh’s relationship with modernity more broadly, which, as McCartney has argued, “was marked by certain fruitful ambivalence” (3). While Waugh presented himself as a “curmudgeon who despised innovation,” he “frequently delight[s] in its formal and thematic possibilities” in his work (3). The beano, through this balance of formal restraint and chaotic content, reveals a society without discipline or authority and thereby devoid of the order needed for hospitality.

Post Oxford, Paul takes up a position as a schoolmaster at Llanabba Castle in Wales. The climax of Paul’s time at the school is the sports carnival, an event conceived out of thin air and at short notice by Llanabba’s owner, Dr Fagan. Seeing an opportunity to flatter visiting parents, Fagan insists on an extravagant affair with “*foie gras* sandwiches,” “champagne-cup,” and a bouquet for Lady Circumference that is “redolent of hospitality” (48). But as the sequence demonstrates, true hospitality is impossible when its motives are impure, and Waugh’s language shows hospitality quite literally transforming into hostility. A disagreement amongst parents over the real winner of a race and the unexpected arrival of Chokey (an African-American) with Margot destroys any amiable sociality, leaving the group split into “two distinctly hostile camps” (76). Fagan deplorably comments at the disastrous carnival’s close that “[n]othing seemed to go quite right in spite of all our preparations” (83). But as the tenets of Christianity and contemporary commentators such as Beerbohm and the Langley Moores make clear, hospitality is a virtue and thereby a moral

quality (Beerbohm 3; Langley Moore and Langley Moore 143). As soon as scheming or pretence enters the mind of the host, the situation can no longer be hospitable.

After agreeing to be the private tutor of Margot's son Peter, Paul takes up residence at the newly rebuilt Beste-Chetwynde country estate, King's Thursday. The bizarreness of the Beste-Chetwynde estate and the demise of its previous iteration point to the degradation of country house hospitality. Much like the sports carnival, King's Thursday evokes the process of hospitality becoming hostility. The original King's Thursday building was steeped in tradition and considered "the finest piece of domestic Tudor in England" (116). It was once a "Mecca of week-end parties" and its previous owners "were always [...] unaffectedly delighted to see their neighbours," and regularly took guests for "a tour round the house" after tea (116). But this ideal hospitable behaviour is eliminated with Margot's transformation of the estate. Margot sees the house as "far worse" than she imagined – so bad, that in her mind, even "Liberty's new building cannot be compared with it" (118). This comparison is telling, showing Margot values newness and modernity over authenticity and tradition. The new Liberty's (a London department store), in terms of its architecture, is a sham: built in 1924, the structure is in the Tudor Revival style. Margot's fondness for the modern, however, is not well received by her neighbours. The word "hostile" is deployed only twice in the novel, used first to describe the sports carnival and then to describe the local reaction to King's Thursday's renovations: "[n]o single act in Mrs Beste-Chetwynde's eventful [...] career had excited quite so much hostile comment" (115). The new King's Thursday's design echoes this hostility: the architecture itself is hostile, with its spatial nonsensicality inconducive to organic social interaction. The modernist monstrosity, designed by Otto, is "clean and square," and is built out of concrete and aluminium, with glass and metal surfaces inside, echoing designs by Le Corbusier and Erich Mendelsohn (119). Yet, as Milthorpe points out, the more intricate features of the house's interiors "stress awkwardness, unexpectedness, and discord," directly opposing its design brief (*Evelyn*

Waugh's Satire 29). It is no wonder satisfying parties cannot take place within the space: Otto tells a journalist that "[t]he only perfect building" is "the factory" because it "house[s] machines, not men" and man can only be happy "when he becomes the channel for the distribution of mechanical forces" (120). Within the spatial confines of King's Thursday, men become machines, and rigidity prohibits pure sociability.

Waugh cautions in a 1930 article that visiting someone's home for the first time can be a potentially shocking experience. It is likely "whatever impression" has been previously formed of the host will "be substantially altered by seeing them at home" ("Parties" 331). Margot typifies Waugh's claim through a weekend house party that she hosts – while being absent for its entire duration. Her unwillingness to entertain her guests herself, and her admission that she has forgotten "who asked to come" as she "gave up inviting people long ago," suggests her indifference towards the event and being a hostess (133). While her guests do go to a whist drive and a dance at the village hall during their stay, they spend the vast majority of their time at the estate with no restrictions on their activity or behaviour. Margot's lack of hospitality jars against the prevailing commentary of the period that emphasised the importance of the hostess in a party's success. Lady Morvyth Benson, writing about the "Friday-to-Monday Hostess" in *Vogue*, claims that a hostess who fails "to awake with a thrill on Fridays, and a sense of loss on Mondays," is missing out on an essential experience (96), suggesting hosting must be internalised as a positive and pleasurable affect. Another *Vogue* article, "Week-end Guests: A London Hostess to Her Country Housekeeper," points out the importance of attention to detail for a successful Friday-to-Monday event. Written as if it was a letter from a hostess to the housekeeper of a country house, the article goes over which bedrooms to prepare, each meal's menu, what cocktails to serve upon the guests' arrival, and even how far to fill up the sweets bowl in the lounge (98). *Harper's Bazaar* likewise points to the delicate art of hosting a country weekend. A 1936 article by Rosamund Harcourt-Smith takes the reader through five "probable" types

of weekend stays that guests will experience in their lives: “the Very Grand, the Friend of the Family, the Arty-Smarty, the Cottage and [...] the Perfect week-end” (45). The perfect weekend is an extreme rarity: it is one where the food and drink are “beyond discussion,” you have “the most comfortable bedroom,” and on Monday you find “yourself to be the most mentally stimulating and physically desirable person in a stimulating and desirable company” (101). In other words, the elements put together by the hostess (the social, the material, the spatial), combined with a dose of circumstance, are determining features of hospitality. As Ahmed suggests, subjects register their experience through their encounters with objects, space, and others (*Queer Phenomenology* 3) – meaning that the host’s efforts are central to how their guests orientate themselves at parties, and whether they evaluate their experience as hospitable or hostile. For Waugh, this gives the host a position of power and control: as he observed, “hostesses should realize that they have authority. It is not their business simply to feed the horde but to tame it” (“Manners” 591). Without a hostess to manage the elements that can be controlled, the country house party’s success is left entirely to chance.

These articles from *Vogue* and *Harper’s Bazaar* place the home at the centre of hospitality, evidenced in their careful detailing of the preparations that must be made to successfully receive and entertain guests. But King’s Thursday cannot be a place for Harcourt-Smith’s perfect weekend because its hostess refuses to make any concrete arrangements. The guests show no anxiety at Margot’s absence and the general vagueness of the event; in fact, their blasé unperturbedness suggests the behaviour of their hostess is not out of the ordinary. The first guests who arrive waste no time in entertaining themselves by putting on music, dancing, and making cocktails, but are otherwise indistinguishable: arriving either by “drifting in vaguely or running in with cries of welcome just as they thought suited them best,” wearing “different clothes of identically the same kind,” and speaking in identical voices (128). The original manuscript for the novel emphasises this

point more strongly. As Davis notes, in the manuscript Sir Humphrey Maltravers is the only guest to be explicitly mentioned by name; but before publication Waugh added more detail and names to the other bright young attendees and placed the party into its own chapter (*Evelyn Waugh, Writer* 43–44). For Martin Stannard, the party scene is “padding” and has nothing to do with the novel’s essential meaning (*Evelyn Waugh* 162–65). Yet this reading seems unfair given the sequence’s importance in emphasising Waugh’s displeasure at the erosion of structure and order. Not only does the chapter emphasise the illogic of a party without a hostess, but it also squarely blames authority for this degradation, through the presence of Maltravers, a government minister. Maltravers is a foil to the behaviour of the other guests: he is a “discordant element in the gay little party” and the only guest who feels “ill at ease” from Margot’s absence (129). While he blames Margot’s shallow friendships for her actions and laments at “what things were coming to” after seeing the behaviour of the other guests, he does nothing to fix these issues (133). The unwillingness of authority – whether it takes the form of appointed roles such as government officials and school deans, or more socially-constructed positions like hosts – to enforce change and instil discipline from above, Waugh suggests, is why the modern world continues to fall into decadence.

Margot is a recurrent character in Waugh’s work and features again as a hostess in *Vile Bodies*, the subject of the next section in this chapter, and *Black Mischief* (1932). Reading these texts in conjunction with *Decline and Fall* demonstrates Margot’s hosting practices are continually in flux. In contrast to *Decline and Fall*, *Vile Bodies* portrays Margot as an active hostess: she is much more attentive to her guest list, refusing a guest’s request for an additional invitation as she “can’t imagine how everyone’s going to get in as is” (75). She is also described as “a very confident hostess” for bringing two incongruous groups – the older generation and the Bright Young People – together at a single event (81). *Black Mischief* initially appears to uphold this version of Margot: when the uninvited Basil Seal arrives at Margot’s cocktail party, she tells him “you had no business to come. I particularly didn’t ask

you" (73). However, despite her apparent perturbed manner, Basil is never asked to leave. It is also disclosed that Margot organises her parties on a whim at the last minute. Her "habit" consists of telling "her butler at cocktail time" that "[t]here will be about twenty to dinner," before telephoning her guests, "saying to each, 'Oh, but you *must* chuck them tonight. I'm all alone and feeling like death'" (79). Despite her inconsistent approach, Margot's hosting relies upon the manipulation of her guests, whether that involves being absent when she should be present, refusing to be accommodating, or exploiting emotional ties.

Tellingly, the grandest and most ceremonial party scheduled to take place in *Decline and Fall*—Paul and Margot's wedding—becomes a non-event. Weddings, as ritual ceremonies imbued with tradition, should ordinarily be expected to operate in alignment with convention and standard—that is, order. But the narrative implies these events can no longer be considered as such. Margot wishes to be married in a church, "with all the barbaric concomitants of bridesmaids, Mendelssohn and Mumm" (143). Language is again unstable: things that are surely civilised—the standard wedding party, classical music, and expensive champagne—are deemed barbaric. The barbarism of the event is exemplified by the "large crowd" that gathers outside the church the day before the ceremony, "equipped [...] with collapsible chairs, sandwiches, and spirit stoves" (148–49), but as more people arrive it quickly transforms into a disorganised mob. "Many guests were crushed [...] in their attempts to reach the doors" and the street is "lined as for a funeral with weeping and hysterical women" (149). In likening festivity to a funeral, Waugh suggests the wedding is doomed before it has even begun, and indeed, it is called off entirely after Paul's arrest for human trafficking.

After Paul's imprisonment and Margot breaking off their engagement in favour of marriage to Maltravers, the novel ends with Paul back at Oxford, pretending to be a cousin of the previous (and now legally dead) Paul Pennyfeather. With Paul's second attempt at Oxford comes a more conventional approach to hospitality. His new friendship with fellow

undergraduate Stubbs, for instance, is established via rather formal means not seen to be practised by anyone else in the novel: Stubbs leaves a calling card with “the corner turned up” at Paul’s rooms, something Paul then reciprocates (211).⁵ When the pair do eventually meet over tea – again, a mode of entertaining that was becoming increasingly outdated in the late 1920s due to the growing preference for the cocktail party – it is perhaps the most pleasurable form of sociability to be found in the entire novel. But their cosy meal of “honey buns and anchovy toast” at “the ugly, subdued little College” is too perfectly idyllic and neat – that is, static – for the reader to assume Waugh is endorsing Paul and his actions at the novel’s conclusion (211). The novel’s epilogue further emphasises Waugh’s displeasure. Now in the third year of his “uneventful residence,” Paul has settled back into ordinary life and has just enjoyed an evening of intellectual conversation with Stubbs over “cocoa” and “chocolate biscuits” (213). The tête-à-tête, however, is immediately followed by a drunken Peter, fresh from a Bollinger Club beano, barging into Paul’s rooms. Throughout the encounter, Paul appears the perfect host: he lets Peter drink his supply of whisky and is generally polite and cordial. While Paul was once “consumedly shy of drunkards” (12), he now converses with one with relative ease, even telling Peter he should stop drinking so much. But again, Waugh refuses to approve Paul’s qualities, as shown in the novel’s final lines: “[s]o the ascetic Ebionites used to turn towards Jerusalem when they prayed. Paul made a note of it. Quite right to suppress them” (216). While Paul has certainly learned how to protect himself from the dynamic types, by returning to the insularity and comfort of his previous life, he offers no real fight against those who threaten to bring down structure and order. He praises himself for his righteousness (telling Peter to stop drinking, endorsing the suppression of the Ebionites) but his unwillingness to enforce this disciplinary action

⁵ Leaving a corner turned up on a calling card indicated the person themselves had left it, as opposed to their servant.

renders it useless. *Decline and Fall*'s parties demonstrate the hostile potential for hospitality, showing that the structure of the host/guest relationship is essential to maintain order, discipline, and authority.

Succession and Repetition: *Vile Bodies*

Vile Bodies is Waugh's most overt work about interwar party-going. Its epigraph, taken from Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, primes the reader to expect chaos from the narrative's outset. Indeed, the two excerpts Waugh selects are telling of the nature of *Vile Bodies*'s festivities, where the characters' lack of interiority dismantles any genuine emotion or feeling—including the provision and reception of hospitality. The first excerpt depicts Alice meeting the Red Queen in the Garden of Live Flowers, where "it takes all the running *you* can do, to keep in the same place" (*Vile Bodies* 5; Carroll 195–96). The second is taken from the moment when Tweedledum and Tweedledee tell Alice she is a figment of the Red King's dreams:

"If I wasn't real," Alice said—half-laughing through her tears, it all seemed so ridiculous—"I shouldn't be able to cry."

"I hope you don't suppose those are real tears?" Tweedledum interrupted in a tone of great contempt. (*Vile Bodies* 5; Carroll 225)

In Alice's alternate world, everything is upside down: running in order to stay in the same place and walking in the wrong direction to move forward. Likewise, in *Vile Bodies*, the rules and structures of sociability are backwards: lords are gossip columnists, spaces such as tethered air-balloons and 10 Downing Street are ideal party locations, and socialites become race car drivers. Not only is everything upside down, but it is also never certain what is real and what is imagined.

These tensions are the primary thematic concerns of *Vile Bodies*. Like Mitford's *Highland Fling* and *Christmas Pudding*, Nichols's *Crazy Pavements*, and Powell's *Afternoon Men*, *Vile Bodies* centres on the Bright Young People: its central characters, Adam Fenwick-Symes and Nina Blount, are a couple on the group's periphery. Their engagement is dependent on Adam's finances, which change regularly throughout the novel. Adam and Nina drift from one frenzied party to the next, failing to be shaken by the excess and thrills of these events. *Vile Bodies* captures the extremes of interwar party-going, showing that no time or place is inappropriate for a party. Textually flat and lacking in interiority, the characters are unable to supply genuine hospitality. The host "imposing their sense of order" upon the guest fundamentally shapes the host/guest relationship (Sheringham and Daruwalla 36), but in *Vile Bodies*, this order is nowhere to be found. The party – a mode of sociability that is typically defined by its ephemerality – transfigures into an everyday event. As Stannard points out, the comedy of *Vile Bodies* "teeters on the brink of hysteria" as opposed to the "fantasy" of *Decline and Fall* (Evelyn Waugh 207). The novel presents a litany of parties: from a savage-themed fancy dress party, an afterparty at 10 Downing Street, and a party held in an airship, to a fictional party found only in gossip columns, an impromptu cocktail party in a nursing home, and Christmas celebrations at a country estate. As these festivities show, the Bright Young People are in flux, yet unable to get anywhere.

Greenberg argues *Vile Bodies* is symptomatic of what Tyrus Miller calls "the condition of generalized mimetism": the novel "blurs distinctions between the subject and object, the real and the simulated, the figural and the literal" (Greenberg 54; T. Miller, *Late Modernism* 158). The novel's opening sequence, where many of its characters are journeying home to Britain across the Channel in rough conditions, is representative of this claim. The nausea-inducing trip establishes a broader instability and an upside-down quality that saturates the remainder of the text. One of the first passengers we meet is Mrs Melrose Ape, "the woman evangelist" whose group of performing angels are named (somewhat wonkily)

after heavenly virtues: Faith, Charity, Fortitude, Humility, and so on (7).⁶ While Mrs Ape's angels are physically "[h]ere" when she takes roll call aboard the ship (7), the virtues after which they are named are severely wanting in the modern Britain they are travelling to. Hospitality, then, itself another virtue, is unlikely to be found either.

Vile Bodies is preoccupied with bodies *qua* things: subjects become objects (see Greenberg 50; Milthorpe, *Evelyn Waugh's Satire* 50). Characters possess little interiority or subjectivity (if any at all), embodying the rigidity that Bergson describes, as the processing of the ship's passengers through Customs shows. One of the passengers, Adam – who looks "exactly as young men like him do look" – is an aspiring author, with his memoir under contract for publication (10). But his manuscript is seized and destroyed by officials for being "downright dirt" (21). As in *Decline and Fall*, because authority labels Adam's work as dirt, it becomes dirt, regardless of its true subject matter. The reader never learns the memoir's contents, and in turn, we never learn much about Adam, in terms of appearance, life story, or personality. Agatha Runcible, one of the Bright Young People, is also caught up in the inspections and is "stripped to the skin" by the corrupt officers after a case of mistaken identity (20). She vows to "ring up [...] all the newspapers and give them all the most shy-making details" (20), but the reader only hears the story through hearsay and headlines: the exact details are never divulged. Waugh's revisions to this section confirm Agatha's lack of interiority: as critical editions of the text note, Agatha tells Adam of "the way they delved" in the manuscript; this is changed to "[t]he way they looked" in the published text (Jacobs xl; Stannard, "Appendix B" 201). The absence of "delving" suggests there is no inside to delve within in the first place, something characteristic of Waugh's revisions throughout the novel as a whole, which strip away character substance (Milthorpe,

⁶ Tellingly, there is no angel named Hope: hope is only mentioned in the song that Mrs Ape sings aboard, but this is purely for economic gain.

“‘Too, Too Shaming’” 89). While the other Bright Young People briefly commiserate with Agatha over the ordeal on the train to London, their bright language (“how sick-making, how too, too awful”) undercuts the pretence of legitimate concern (23). As the narrator describes, the group feel “queer” from the journey but “[cheer] up wonderfully” upon hearing Agatha’s story and quickly turn to discussing an upcoming party (23), inverting normative affective logic: pleasure comes from the discomfort of others. This emotional backwardness continues throughout the novel: as Charteris observes, the only moment that truly warrants festive celebration – Colonel Blount blessing Adam’s proposal to Nina – actively goes uncelebrated (126). As Adam tells Nina, “I couldn’t face a party. I’m so excited” (65). Positive and real emotion, it would seem, is not grounds for a party. Waugh swiftly undercuts this genuine affect, exposing Colonel Blount’s “endorsement” (materially expressed through a cheque for a thousand pounds) as bogus, signed by “Charlie Chaplin” (69).

The host of this upcoming party is Archie Schwert, who shows that hospitality carries no real commitment on the part of the host in the Bright Young People’s world. The savage-themed fancy dress party is described as “Archie Schwert’s party” (23), but there is little positive evidence of Archie’s hosting in the narrative itself. This is signalled even in the event’s invitations – often the first indicator of what a given party will be like – which place their emphasis on another man, Johnnie Hoop, instead. Inspired by *Blast* and the *Futurist Manifesto*, Johnnie has authored the invitation, dividing it into two columns of text: one is “a list of all the things Johnnie hated”; the other is “all the things he thought he liked” (44). Archie – the party’s real host – is lost within this popular appropriation of avant-gardism. Moreover, as Milthorpe notes, Johnnie is lost too: the emphasis in the invitation is on what Johnnie thinks he likes, suggesting he thinks but does not truly know for himself (*Evelyn Waugh’s Satire* 43). It is also telling that the guests do not understand what Johnnie likes

either — there is an evident absence of intimacy, with one guest, Miss Mouse, translating the invitation word by word, using a library for reference.

Archie first appears at the party with a “champagne bottle in hand,” as he greets Miss Mouse (43). While this set of actions — holding champagne, talking to guests — may suggest a good host, the subsequent line immediately undermines Archie’s hosting: “Miss Brown, who would have liked a drink, [...] didn’t know quite how to set about it” (44). Good hospitality, as several interwar commentaries dictate, should mean Miss Brown does not need to “set about” anything; if Archie were doing his job correctly, he would have filled her glass already. Woodman, for instance, defines “making the guests feel at their ease” as one of four requisites for a good host (*Foulsham’s* 10), and Boulestin claims “[a] party without drinks is no party at all” and “[e]ven the most conscientious teetotaler [...] would provide for his guests” (*Finer* 109). But it appears Archie’s behaviour is entirely mechanical: his two subsequent appearances throughout the evening are much the same, both in their actions and language, either “pausing” or “passing” (“as he passed”; “paused to say”; “pausing with a bottle of champagne”; “passing with a bottle of champagne” [43, 45, 46]). Pausing suggests inaction and stasis, yet passing suggests motion, ephemerality, and inattention: Archie is caught between these conflicting impulses, leaving him unable to fulfil his role as host. Waugh’s satire, as Greenberg argues, not only “diagnoses the mechanization of the human” but also actively “celebrates” this very mechanisation (68), much in the same way as Powell’s *Afternoon Men*. Rendered into repetition, Archie is unable to shake himself into a genuine form of sociable behaviour.

Passing, though, also suggests someone who represents themselves as belonging to a different group to their own: what Elaine K. Ginsberg describes as the disguising of “elements of an individual’s presumed ‘natural’ or ‘essential’ identity,” such as race, ethnicity, class, and gender (3). Throughout the text, Archie is continually othered, excluded, and marked as an outsider: he is described as “too terribly common,” and “[t]he *most* bogus

man" (24). His German surname, *Schwert*, also suggests he may be Jewish. At the novel's close, Archie is imprisoned for being "*an undesirable alien*," underscoring his foreignness (186). In a telephone conversation with Adam before the party, Nina tells him not to bother dressing up, as "[n]o one will, except Archie," implying he is different to everyone else (28). As a host who is othered, Archie speaks to what Emily Ridge describes as a "frontier anxiety" common in 1930s writing, frequently expressed through "[t]roubled representations of host-guest exchanges" ("Threshold Anxieties" 481, 483). As the "passing" host, Archie embodies hospitality's inherent tension: the possibility that someone familiar may be a stranger, that kindness can be replaced by hostility in a flash.

Much like Johnnie's use of avant-garde manifestos, the party's theme — to come dressed like a savage — seems to appropriate high culture, mimicking the early twentieth-century vogue for primitive art. It is also reflective of the period's obsession with fancy dress festivities. Patrick Balfour recalls several themed parties held by various Bright Young People, such as the Mozart Party, the Circus Party, and the Wild West Party (169–70). Novelty was central to these events, as evidenced through the 1927 Impersonation Party where guests came in a variety of costumes, including French tennis players, bohemian poets, and members of royalty ("Another Group" 201), and a proposed prison-themed party, where guests would be required to dress as convicts and ushers would dress as wardens ("Talk" 19). Fancy dress, though, has a longer history: as Castle notes, it first became popular through the form of the masquerade in the early eighteenth century (2). Central to the masquerade was the concealment of the true self, something often taken to the extreme by impersonating one's total opposite through costume (4–5). While the masquerade certainly popularised the concept of fancy dress in Britain, by the interwar period, fancy dress no longer operated in such a transformative way. As Marshik observes, the aim of partaking in fancy dress in the period and its texts is not to obscure or disguise one's own identity (103). Instead, through its "historical, artistic, or creative properties" the

fancy dress costume becomes “the supreme sartorial form for projecting an idealized self” (103, 105), echoing Goffman’s ideas about overtly conscious social fronts. The party’s guests, then, in sticking to the savage theme (and “[n]umbers of them had done so”), emphasise their incivility (*Vile Bodies* 44). In particular, Agatha’s choice of attire indicates her shallowness. Dressed in a Hawaiian costume, she is “the life and soul of the evening” (45). Yet, the narrative establishes before the event that Agatha is always like this, demonstrated through her rapid dissemination of the Customs saga. The Hawaiian costume makes Agatha’s identity all the more apparent: as she tumbles out the front door of 10 Downing Street the morning after the party, “trailing garlands of equatorial flowers” behind her, she becomes a target for even more attention as she is crowded by the press (50). But the scanty costume also echoes Agatha’s “lack of substance” (Marshik 116). While Agatha’s costume may emphasise her brightness, there is again no inside in which to delve: there is no sense of depth or interiority.

The best hostess (if one exists) in *Vile Bodies* is Miss Brown, the daughter of the Prime Minister, who invites the last of the savage partygoers back to 10 Downing Street. The evening is “lovely,” and Miss Brown is “[f]lushed with successful hospitality” as she “trot[s] from guest to guest” offering them food, drink, and cigars, as well as agreeing that Agatha can stay the night (47). But the provision of hospitality is rare in the Bright Young People’s world, as this scene suggests through its dual narration, a technique used throughout the novel. The first narrator describes the world in a detached tone not dissimilar to a gossip columnist; the second, expressed in parentheses, footnotes, and other textual markers, provides the moral critique (Milthorpe, *Evelyn Waugh’s Satire* 37). Parentheses intrude upon the paragraph describing the events at Number 10 to provide evaluative comment upon Miss Brown’s hosting skills: “(She turned out to be rather a good hostess, though over-zealous.)” (47). The sentence’s tone suggests shock at the notion that someone still is capable of supplying hospitality, but the qualifier — that Miss Brown is over-zealous as a hostess —

points to her inevitable decline. Miss Brown's father, the Prime Minister, is likewise a hospitable host: he apologises to Agatha the next morning for being "inhospitable," as he did not realise "we had a guest," after describing her as a "dancing Hottentot woman," thinking she was some sort of hallucinatory vision (49). With their common and plain surname – a stark contrast to the entertaining names of other characters (Runcible, Hoop, Throbbing, Malpractice) – Miss Brown and her father are not built for the society they have gotten mixed up in: the Brown government falls as a consequence of the party, and the Browns drop out of the narrative entirely, never to be mentioned again. Not only is hospitality regularly absent from festivity, but there is also no reward for supplying it, as the case of the Brown family shows.

The degradation of hospitality in *Vile Bodies* seems, in part, to be down to choices in venue. No spatial location is inappropriate for a party, according to the Bright Young People. In a desperate bid for novelty, party locations are chosen for their originality rather than their appropriateness for sociability, as the party held on a "captive dirigible" shows (103). Adam, Nina, and Nina's childhood friend Ginger Littlejohn are invited to the event by Johnnie, but Waugh's choice of language makes clear that Johnnie is not its host. The narrator tells the reader: "they met Johnnie Hoop, who asked them all to the party in a few days' time in the captive balloon" (100). Instead of being "his" party, it is simply "the" party – a semantic difference that suggests the party is missing a host altogether. This lack of a host (for none ever appears at the party itself) maps onto the inconvenience of the festivities: the first, bathetic descriptor of the event is "[i]t was not a really good evening" (103). As Milthorpe and I have argued elsewhere, the captive dirigible is described in a range of terms that hint to its uncomfortableness, spatial illogic, and the negative affects it produces for its guests (Milthorpe and Murphy 42). The "long drive" to the "degraded suburb" where it is stationed leaves its guests "chilled and depressed," as they stumble "painfully" over the dirigible's cables, while others arrive in cars that are forced to negotiate

the field's "uneven grass" (103). The interiors of the dirigible are much of the same: it is "narrow and hot" with confusing "spiral staircases" and "protrusions at every corner" (103).⁷ This bewildering floorplan leaves guests inside feeling "unwell" and "ill," and the novelty of the dirigible is largely stripped away by the fact that "all the same faces" are in attendance (103). The dirigible party culminates in what is arguably the novel's most famous passage, where the second narrator dwells upon the simultaneous multiplicity and sameness of modern party-going:

(... Masked parties, Savage parties, Victorian parties, Greek parties, Wild West parties, Russian parties, Circus parties, [...] parties in flats and studies and houses and ships and hotels and night clubs, in windmills and swimming-baths, [...] dull dances in London and comic dances in Scotland and disgusting dances in Paris — all that succession and repetition of massed humanity ... Those vile bodies ...) (104)

Despite the material and spatial variety these parties generate in their myriad of themes and locations, they still result in succession and repetition. The unpleasant experiences of the guests during the captive dirigible episode repeatedly perpetuate across all the parties they attend, and yet, without the self-reflexivity to break this cycle, the Bright Young People are unable to escape.

The dirigible party is deliberately contrasted with a party amongst the older generation at the stately Anchorage House, a spatial location which in its very name is the antithesis to the floating airship. However, while it adheres to a more conventional depiction of parties and sociability, it too offers little in the way of order. The party's guests are consumed by the issue of the younger generation, culminating in a suggestion from Father

⁷ Waugh's pessimistic description, as the *Sunday Dispatch* reported in April 1930, did not stop some from attempting to hire an airship for their own festivities in the sky (qtd. in Stannard, *Evelyn Waugh* 204).

Rothschild, a Jesuit priest, that “perhaps it is all in some way historical,” and that the Bright Young People are “possessed with an almost fatal hunger for permanence” (111). But as Heath argues, Rothschild diagnoses the Bright Young People’s problems but does absolutely nothing about these problems himself (J. Heath 86). While Rothschild claims “there is a radical instability in our whole world-order” (112), there is little evidence of his own action towards fixing this instability, echoing the non-interventionist stance of authority in *Decline and Fall*.

The instability of the modern world (and in turn, partying) is in part due to the predominance of gossip, a topic which flavours the text’s form and content. As Greenberg suggests, the novel offers “an anxious analysis” of how events are reported and interpreted in public and private spheres (55). Festivity is continuously under surveillance in *Vile Bodies*. Gossip writers, whether invited or not, are endlessly present, writing and telephoning through the latest scoop for the newspapers’ society pages. This hysteria is pushed to its extremes as the novel progresses, with the original Mr Chatterbox, Simon Balcairn, committing suicide after being caught gate-crashing Margot’s party. The novel’s obsession with the press is reflective of the growing influence of mass media in the interwar years. The broadening influence of the tabloid newspaper in Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a response to the growing literate public. The popular press – led in the interwar period by media moguls Lords Rothermere and Beaverbrook – attracted a wide audience due to its “concise, vivid prose” (LeMahieu 26), a stark contrast to the traditional journalism of broadsheet newspapers. This language levelled the playing field between the producers of the popular press and their consumers: it was a more approachable style, akin to “conversation between friends” (55). The gossip writer of the period particularly exemplified this new form of writing. The gossip column allowed its readers to live vicariously, providing a privileged insider’s view of the latest parties, weddings, and fashions (45).

Following Simon's death, Adam briefly takes on the role of Mr Chatterbox and begins inventing people to be the subjects of his gossip. His "most important creation" is Imogen Quest and her husband Andrew, who soon become "a byword for social inaccessibility" and signify the pinnacle of social success (96). Imogen is entirely manufactured yet is given more personality and character than anyone else in the novel: she is "witty and tender-hearted; passionate and serene, sensual and temperate, impulsive and discreet" (96). But Adam's success with the Quests begins to slip as he continues to push the boundaries between the fictive and real: he dedicates "several paragraphs" to Imogen's preparations for an upcoming party she will host, only to receive numerous "letters of complaint from gate-crashers" who had turned up to the party's address to find the home uninhabited (97). Imogen is set up as the perfect hostess, but her fictionality points to the fact that such perfection is impossible in modern reality.

The conflation between festivity and gossip reaches its peak at the impromptu gathering held in Agatha's nursing home room, where she is recovering from injuries sustained in a car crash. As various guests pop in to visit Agatha, the gathering becomes "quite a party," as the guests play records and drink cocktails (159). Agatha becomes hostess by default (as it is her room), but the party leaves her in a state of delirium, from which she never recovers. Agatha's instability is produced mainly by having "awful" dreams where "we were all driving round [...] and none of us could stop, and there was an enormous audience composed entirely of gossip writers and gate-crashers [...] all shouting to us at once to go faster" (158). The party in her room further blurs the distinction between the real and unreal, public and private. The goings-on of the party are interspersed with Miles Malpractice, the latest Mr Chatterbox, dictating his column for the next day's newspaper over the phone. The scene is effectively told to us twice: firstly through the present, regular narrative, and secondly through the future gossip column: "*Miss Runcible was entertaining quite a large party which included...*" (160). Johnnie becomes an aspiring painter who "is going

to Paris to study,” while Nina is defined entirely by her engagement to Ginger, who is nothing more than “the well-known polo player” (160–61). When parties and the people who attend them become newsworthy, they are rendered into flatness: the style of the column strips away any substance, turning partygoers into the spectacle that Agatha describes.

In the final instance of festivity in the novel, Adam masquerades as Ginger at Nina’s family Christmas celebrations.⁸ The day offers an apparently sentimental depiction of festivity compared to the fast-paced, blazing parties of the rest of the novel, but Waugh refuses to endorse the couple’s actions. The narrator sardonically describes their attempts at quaint intimacy: “[l]ater they put some crumbs of their bread and butter on the windowsill and a robin redbreast came to eat them. The whole day was like that” (180). Adam and Nina’s manufactured cosiness and happiness, are, as Stannard points out, seen as “decadence and ignorance” (*Evelyn Waugh* 199). No party – whether bright or not – has the means to be taken seriously if there are no structures of authority and order. As Ahmed describes, our perception of the world – which is a place of “shared inhabitation” – is determined by how and where we direct “our energy and attention” (*Queer Phenomenology* 3). Because the Bright Young People of *Vile Bodies* orientate themselves towards ephemeral, unstable, and vacuous parties that offer no real hospitality, the world itself becomes empty and inimical. This culminates at the novel’s close, where the continued lack of structure finally tips the nation into the “biggest battlefield in the history of the world” (186): the war is an even more damaging version of the waste and trash already produced by parties in the novel. *Vile Bodies*, then, critiques the repetitive everydayness of modern party-going, suggesting such hollow events can only give way to more destruction. *A Handful of Dust* continues this theme: however, it offers a more specific portrayal of the hostile host.

⁸ For more on Christmas party celebrations, see my analysis of Mitford’s *Christmas Pudding* in Chapter 5.

Between Christianity and Chaos: *A Handful of Dust*

In the opening pages of *A Handful of Dust*, the protagonist Tony Last receives an unexpected telegram. Upon reading it, he announces to his wife Brenda that “[s]omething too horrible has happened” (27). But instead of terrible news—a death in the family or a scandal, perhaps—the real horror of the message is exposed as a forgotten guest, John Beaver, who will be shortly arriving by train for a weekend visit to Tony and Brenda’s country estate. This somewhat backwards reaction—the thought of a guest arriving should ideally inspire joy in the host—characterises much of the novel’s broader attitudes towards festivity. The emotions most frequently encountered by the characters in festive situations are those Ngai describes as “ugly feelings” (6): anxiety, irritation, and boredom. These ugly feelings, Ngai writes, are ugly because they are “*amoral* and *noncathartic*”: they are unsatisfying to experience and offer no release (6). In particular, it is the thought of supplying or receiving hospitality that most often gives way to these unpleasant affects, such as the prospect of entertaining an unwanted guest. Written following Waugh’s conversion to Catholicism, *A Handful of Dust* is an exploration of the everyday horrors of modern festivity in a spiritually vacant society. In letters, Waugh described the novel as “[v]ery difficult to write because for the first time I am trying to deal with normal people instead of eccentrics” (*Letters* 84). Waugh further elaborated that *A Handful of Dust* was “humanist and contained all I had to say about humanism” (“Fan-Fare” 304). In a modern, humanist world devoid of faith and purposeful pursuit—which reaches its climax with the character of Mr Todd, Tony’s final host and captor—hospitality becomes a vacuous, mechanised process that leads to little satisfaction for either host or guest.

Waugh explicitly brings hospitality and Catholicism together in the 1946 essay, “The Hospitality of Campion Hall”; its title refers to the Jesuit private hall at the University of Oxford named after St. Edmund Campion (the subject of Waugh’s 1935 biography, *Edmund*

Campion). Father Martin D'Arcy, the Master of the Hall during the 1930s, was a friend and adviser of Waugh's. In the article, Waugh recollects the pleasurable evenings spent at the hall, praising D'Arcy's ability to successfully bring together an eclectic selection of guests: "[y]ou never knew whom you would meet at *Campion Hall* but [...] they would all fit harmoniously into the social structure which the Master [...] ingeniously contrived" (317). It is for this reason that Waugh believes "books of reminiscence" on the 1930s will feature in their indexes "the entry: '*Campion Hall, delightful evening at*'" (316). Tellingly, though, the standard evening at *Campion Hall* begins "with some formality," further pointing to Waugh's valuing of ordered festivity (317). As a site of order via its associations with Catholicism, *Campion Hall* operates as the epitome of virtuous Christian hospitality.

In *A Handful of Dust*, such faith-based hospitality is nowhere to be found. The novel centres on Tony and Brenda; *Hetton Abbey* is Tony's ancestral – but crumbling and architecturally inauthentic – country estate. Brenda, tired of routine life in the country, begins an affair with the plain Beaver in London, taking up a flat in the capital in order to do so. When Brenda asks Tony for a divorce, he escapes his problems by joining an explorer on a mission to find "the City," a mysterious place in the depths of the Brazilian jungle (162). After a series of misfortunate events, Tony is rescued by the sinister Mr Todd, a humanist *par excellence*, who condemns him to an eternity of reading the novels of Dickens. The novel is punctuated throughout by a series of parties, but in a world where hospitality has become morally bankrupt, the partygoers cannot bring themselves to have a satisfying experience. From the country estate weekends, parties hosted by vapid society figures, drunken nights in London nightclubs, and house parties in Brighton, to its final, fantastical scenes in the Brazilian jungle, *A Handful of Dust* demonstrates the horrors of modern hospitality. In the moments when hospitality and hosting are most needed, there is only hostility; conversely, it is only in moments when a lapse in hospitality would be forgiven that it is supplied,

aligning with Ann Pasternak Slater's reading of the novel as thematically concerned with "right things in wrong places" (48).

Of the three novels studied in this chapter, *A Handful of Dust* is the only one conceived entirely following Waugh's conversion to Catholicism. As such, Waugh's treatment of hospitality in *A Handful of Dust* takes on explicitly religious tones: a lack of hospitality, the novel suggests, is a direct consequence of the decline in faith in society. As many scholars have observed, the novel is a critique of humanism, the philosophical movement that places man instead of God at its centre (see, for example: Davis, Introduction xvi; Stannard, *Evelyn Waugh* 378). As Waugh writes in "Fan-Fare," *A Handful of Dust* is "a study of other sorts of savage at home and the civilized man's helpless plight among them" (303). Without faith (and thus civilisation), Waugh proposes, genuine hospitality is unable to take place. Waugh himself argued that "in the present phase of European history the essential issue is no longer between Catholicism [...] and Protestantism [...] but between Christianity and Chaos" ("Converted" 367). Chaos, for Waugh, is the decaying and secular society that humanism creates.

Beaver's unanticipated visit immediately sets the novel's tone regarding its attitudes to hospitality. Even his choice of train is an inconvenience: the 3:18 p.m. service means "[o]ne reached the house at about a quarter to four," so if "one was a stranger there was an awkward time until tea" (28). In order to deal with the unwanted arrival, Tony and Brenda plan a deliberately monotonous schedule, hoping he will cut his visit short out of sheer misery, and give him the worst bedroom in the house because "[n]o one who sleeps there ever comes again" (28). During the visit, Tony and Brenda go through the motions of providing bare minimum hospitality: not only is Beaver's room in a poor location and his bed uncomfortable, but there is no reading lamp, the inkpot is "dry," and the fire "had been lit but had gone out" (30–31). The Lasts' poor hospitality is more apparent given Beaver's expertise: he examines his room "with the care of an experienced guest" (30). Indeed, aside

from his poor choice of train, Beaver demonstrates himself to be a consummate guest throughout his stay: he is “well used to making conversation” (28), “well practised in the art of being shown over houses” (37), and tips both the butler and the footman “ten shillings each” (39). After he leaves, Brenda observes that Beaver “wasn’t too awful” after all, while Tony is impressed that “he took a very intelligent interest” during his tour of Hetton (39). It is only Tony – bound up in sentimentality – who expresses remorse at their treatment of Beaver. He decides to serve champagne at dinner as a “pledge of hospitality” (even though no one likes it), worries he has “behaved inhospitably to that young man again” after informing Beaver he need not come to church, and tells Brenda he “feel[s] awful about Beaver” (31). Brenda, meanwhile, merely states that “Beaver’s all right,” and feels no guilt over the situation at all (31). Tony’s concerns about providing and receiving hospitality, on the other hand, persist throughout the entirety of the novel.

While Brenda carries no anxiety over her hosting practices, Beaver’s visit does set in motion her increased participation in London society, which ultimately leads to their affair. It is the allure of parties that attracts Brenda to Beaver: she is surprised and intrigued to find he is “particularly knowledgeable” about London society (29). But the novel shows London sociability is just as empty as that of the country, bereft of any pleasurable or meaningful affect. Without the structures of traditional hospitality to provide a tether, neither city nor country can provide a satisfying experience. For the London set, their lives are characterised by boredom, a decidedly modern affect. As Patricia Meyer Spacks has convincingly argued, boredom arises from the split between work and leisure (17), with the twentieth century being a “paradigmatic situation for boredom” (219). Boredom’s link to modernity is inextricable, as Elizabeth S. Goodstein has shown (3). Secularity, too, is linked to boredom: faith gives occupation through its focus on what it offers beyond life on earth (Spacks 21). Too wealthy to warrant needing to work, those in the London set have nothing else to fill their time other than superficial, shallow instances of sociability. For instance, social climber

and hostess Polly Cockpurse begins a phone call with “what’s the dirt today?” (53), while Mrs Beaver holds luncheons that are devoid of any genuine hospitality, with her guests being “chosen for no mutual bond—least of all affection” (42). Friendships and festivities are entirely shallow, as illustrated by the first party that Brenda and Beaver attend together in London. Held by Polly, the party is “an accurate replica of all the best parties” Polly has attended over the year (49). But the party is not held out of a genuine desire on Polly’s part to meet with friends. Instead, it signifies her reaching the pinnacle of social success as a hostess: the partygoers include “[p]eople who, only eighteen months before, would have pretended to be ignorant of her existence” (50). While people had previously “taken her hospitality more casually” by bringing unexpected guests with them, they now “rung up in the morning and asked whether they might do so” (50). Polly’s success, however, is undercut by her impure motives. In a 1930 article, Waugh was scathing of the scheming hostess, criticising those who have a “private ambition for fame” (“Parties” 333). Louis Bromfield was even more critical in a 1935 article for *Harper’s Bazaar*, claiming that being a hostess “is a kind of obsession which slowly [...] is achieved in the atrophy of all organs and impulses having to do with such human emotions as love, friendship and even loyalty” (44). In modern Britain, Waugh and Bromfield imply, it is almost impossible to find a hostess who supplies honest hospitality and harbours no desire for social success.⁹

Waugh took a low view not only of hostesses like Polly but also guests who fail on their end of the host/guest relationship; namely, the habit of “chucking,” an early twentieth-century slang term for blowing off a commitment, most often at the last minute. As Beci Carver observes, chucking and indecision are characteristic of high society life in interwar Britain (897). In *A Handful of Dust*, the culture of chucking among the characters is firmly entrenched, making Beaver’s habit of sitting by the telephone waiting for a last-minute

⁹ I return to the scheming hostess in my discussion of Benson’s Mapp and Lucia series in Chapter 6.

invitation to lunch entirely rational. Waugh's diary entries from June 1930 indicate his frustrations with those who chuck. On 6 June, he reported that he "gave what should have been an amusing luncheon party at the Ritz" but that it had been spoiled because "there was a horse-race that day and everybody chucked" (*Diaries* 313). A few days later, he wrote that he had used the event as inspiration for an article in the *Daily Mail*, which was "all against Baby Jungman who chucked my luncheon on Friday with peculiar insolence" (314).¹⁰ In the article, titled "Such Appalling Manners!", Waugh takes issue with the impoliteness of last-minute chucking:

I have been to very few luncheon or dinner parties during the last month where someone has not "chucked" usually within an hour of the meal. Twice I have seen hostesses receive telephone messages while their party was assembled waiting, to say "Miss So-and-So regrets that she will be unable to come to-day." In most cases no letter of explanation followed. (274)

In the rest of the essay, Waugh (influenced by Jungman's recent behaviour) suggests chucking is a purely feminine phenomenon (275). But *A Handful of Dust* shows it to be a universal habit. For instance, Tony's drunken night out with his friend Jock Grant-Menzies in London (the only time Tony travels to the capital in the novel) is marked by chucking and being chucked. At a gentlemen's club, and later, in the seedy depths of a nightclub, indecision (along with alcohol) clouds the pair's minds as they debate whether or not they should go to the flat to visit Brenda. It is chucking that allows the progression of the drunken sequence: Jock seeks out Tony's company after being "chucked" by his date ("it's the last time I ask that bitch out"), while Tony is hoping for Brenda to chuck her

¹⁰ Teresa "Baby" Jungman was a well-known society figure, Bright Young Person, and devout Catholic. Waugh was enamoured by her when they met in 1930. In 1933, he proposed marriage but was turned down because of his divorce from Gardner.

commitment to another event so they can see each other (67). Tony later darkly remarks that “*you* feel low because your girl’s chucked, and *I* feel low because mine won’t chuck” (69). But Tony and Jock are just as guilty of chucking themselves: through a series of phone calls and conversations throughout the evening, their plans are made, cancelled, and remade several times over. The decline of hospitality, then, is not solely on the part of the host; guests, too, are to blame, giving way to a broader malaise in society regarding its attitudes towards sociability.

Waugh directly juxtaposes two parties in the centre of the narrative: Tony’s hunting weekend at Hetton and a London party featuring a fortune teller attended by Brenda. Both parties are disrupted when a fatal accident involving John Andrew, Tony and Brenda’s young son, occurs during the hunt. The two groups react in different ways to the news. Despite the tragedy of the incident, Tony remains the polite gentleman, thinking of his guests (“[t]hey had better have some luncheon before they go”) and telling a footman to call other hunt participants to thank them for coming, and to enquire after the health of a young woman also involved in the accident (108). In a situation where a lapse in hospitality and manners would surely be forgiven, Tony is the most hospitable he has ever been, a stark contrast to his behaviour with Beaver at the novel’s outset. Tony is only able to be the perfect host in moments where it is not expected of him, exposing the inherent backwardness of a modern, humanist society. However, the London party that Brenda attends illustrates just how shallow and unfeeling the relationships among her set are: her companions waste no time getting back to their activities. As Brenda “we[eps] helplessly” in reaction to the news, “[u]pstairs Mrs Northcote had Souki Foucauld-Esterhazy by the foot” (119). What is more, Souki is told the same fortune as Brenda (“[t]here are four men dominating your fate”), exposing the fortune teller and the entire London set as a sham (119).

Following Brenda's announcement that she wants a divorce, Tony takes Milly to Brighton to stage his infidelity, a common convention of the period.¹¹ On the evening of their stay, Tony and Milly attend dinner together (under the watchful eye of hired private investigators) and later go to a party. Tony and Milly in this sequence are performing at two levels: as a couple, but also as an adulterer and mistress, aligning with Goffman's assertion that individuals craft fronts for particular social situations (26). As Goffman observes, fronts are often consciously enacted through manipulating appearance and manner (34). Tony and Milly's appearance and manner in the sequence show them attempting to align themselves more closely to the roles they need to play. Tony is acutely aware of what is expected of him:

Tony [...] reminded himself that phantasmagoric, and even gruesome as the situation might seem to him, he was nevertheless a host, so that he knocked at the communicating door and passed with a calm manner into his guest's room; [...] no new, mad thing brought to his notice, could add a jot to the all encompassing chaos that shrieked about his ears. He smiled at Milly from the doorway. "Charming," he said, "perfectly charming. Shall we go down to dinner?" (139–40)

Tony's realisation that he is "nevertheless a host," signals his awareness of the particular role he is expected to perform. Just as Archie passes in *Vile Bodies*, Tony "passes" as a good host as he moves from one room to the next. There is a stark contrast between his internal anxiousness about "a world bereft of order" filled with noisy, "all encompassing chaos" and the calm and polite external utterance that follows. Tony – who still adheres to traditional codes of sociability and manners – recognises the need to perform the role of a gentleman despite his internal anxieties.

¹¹ By way of example, Waugh's friend Diana Guinness was granted a decree *nisi* against Bryan Guinness "on the ground of his adultery with Isolde Field at an hotel at Brighton" in 1933, even though she was the guilty party ("Decree Nisi" 4).

The host of the party that Tony and Milly attend provides perfect hospitality, continually circulating the room, engaging in conversation, fixing the troublesome wireless, and refilling empty glasses. Tony wonders “whether he was as amiable” when unexpected guests arrive at Hetton; given his frosty reception of Beaver earlier in the novel, it seems unlikely (142). The alcohol supplied is “the right stuff” (142), and the host regularly checks in with Tony, who does not seem to be enjoying the festive activity going on around him. “Delighted to see you,” the host tells Tony (despite only meeting him that very night), suggesting he visits again to see the place when it is less busy (142). Even though the guests consume “a lot of the right stuff,” the party does not descend into drunken chaos and remains a rather dignified affair (142). The host is the ideal of hospitable behaviour that Tony is incapable of replicating at the right moment, something that only serves to amplify Tony’s inner turmoil, leaving him to “[review] over and over again the incidents of the last three months” as he falls asleep (143).

The ending of the novel – Tony’s journey into the depths of the Brazilian jungle, where he is condemned to a lifetime of reading the works of Dickens aloud – puzzled early readers. Fellow writer and friend Henry Green expressed concern over the novel’s sudden shift in setting and tone, writing to Waugh that “I feel the end is so fantastic that it throws the rest out of proportion [...] to let Tony be detained by some madman introduces an entirely fresh note and we are with phantasy with a ph at once” (qtd. in Stannard, *Evelyn Waugh* 377). However, as several critics have noted, the events in Brazil are essential to the novel as they highlight that savages continually surround Tony, no matter his spatial location – the uncivilised savages in Brazil, and the civilised ones in London (Carens 82; J. Heath 104–5; Stannard, *Evelyn Waugh* 379). In fact, as Waugh comments in “Fan-Fare,” the novel “began at the end” (303): the final episode partially draws upon his 1933 short story “The Man Who Liked Dickens.” After the publication of the story, Waugh found “the idea

kept working in my mind. I wanted to discover how the prisoner got there," resulting in *A Handful of Dust* (303).

The Brazil sequence also has implications for the novel's representation of hospitality: as Heath argues, Tony transforms "from reluctant host to reluctant guest" during the ending scenes (J. Heath 113). Its location outside of Britain separates it from the other parties examined in this chapter, demonstrating Waugh's disdain for the emptiness of all rituals, whether at home or abroad. Waugh's travels to the country (and neighbouring British Guiana) in 1932–33, which he documented in the travelogue *Ninety-Two Days* (1934), inspired this section of the narrative. Waugh's survival during his journey from Georgetown to Boa Vista (and back again) was reliant upon hospitality from others. *Ninety-Two Days* supplies valuable insight into Waugh's feelings about being received as a guest by hosts such as the governor in Georgetown, various ranch owners, religious missions, and the indigenous peoples. A small village on his journey inland is deemed "a hospitable place" because he was shown "where I could spend the night, and [...] where I could wash" and given "a present of bananas" (58). In contrast, Waugh was much less impressed with another village on his return route, where its residents "attempted to show some hospitality but the *cassiri* they brought out was warm and only half-fermented" (139). The priest of the Jesuit mission, Father Mather, is labelled "the kindest and most generous of all the hosts of the colony" (74); conversely, the Benedictine monk who meets Waugh in Boa Vista is described as "accept[ing] our arrival with resignation" (86). While Waugh concedes much of the book "deal[s] with the difficulties of getting from place to place," he argues that this is inevitable as it is only "by crawling on the face of it that one learns a country" (151). Hospitality, as *Ninety-Two Days* shows, is a central and essential aspect of life.

Like Waugh's mission to reach Boa Vista – which he anticipated as being "a town of dazzling attraction" (*Ninety-Two Days* 84) – Tony's journey is a pilgrimage of sorts to an imagined place: he is in search of "the City," which is "Gothic in character," and "a

transfigured Hetton" (*Handful* 164). Hospitality was, of course, an essential aspect of ancient pilgrimage, with pilgrims being given sustenance and shelter at the stops along their journey. Tony's pilgrimage is also a quest narrative, given Hetton's links to Arthurian legend through its rooms, which are "each named from Malory" (17). In Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, the Knights of the Round Table are reliant upon the provision of hospitality during their mission for the Holy Grail. This link between Christianity and Arthurian legends—while considered outmoded today—is most famously made in Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* (1920), a book which Waugh owned.¹² Tony, seeing himself in line with one of Arthur's hero knights, is seeking his own holy grail, but he has already broken chivalric code by being inhospitable to guests in his home. Furthermore, Tony's pilgrimage quest lacks any spiritual connection, meaning the Gothic city he is looking for can only be humanist, much like the Hetton he has come from.

The humanist holy grail materialises as the hut of Mr Todd, an Englishman who has lived in the jungle since birth. Tellingly, the City is "served" to Tony in his hallucinations by Ambrose, his butler at Hetton, emphasising the centrality of service and duty to Tony's imagined utopia (205). Mr Todd initially appears as the perfect host: he takes in Tony, who is delirious with fever, and nurses him back to health, supplying him with medicine, food, and safety. He is illiterate but fond of the novels of Dickens, and as such only asks that Tony reads to him in repayment for his kindness. Mr Todd's character is inspired by Mr Christie, an intensely religious ranch owner whom Waugh stayed with during his journey. While others warned Waugh of Mr Christie's eccentricity, a tired horse left Waugh with no option but to stop at the ranch. The "fantastic conversations of Mr Christie" combined with "heat,

¹² *A Handful of Dust*'s title originates from Eliot's 1922 poem *The Waste Land* ("I will show you fear in a handful of dust" [6]). In Eliot's explanatory footnotes to the poem, he makes explicit reference to *From Ritual to Romance* (21).

thirst, hunger” and copious amounts of rum, made for a surreal evening that Waugh described as “a finger’s breadth above reality” (*Ninety-Two Days* 64). As Meckier notes, Mr Christie’s religious fanaticism is transfigured into Mr Todd’s earnest enthusiasm for Dickens, satirising the idea that Dickens can be “a substitute religion” (“Why” 172). Mr Todd’s interest in Dickens marks him as a humanist, as Waugh saw Dickens as a figurehead of sorts for the movement (171). This reversal of character extends to their provision of hospitality. While Mr Christie was known to “not participate in the open hospitality of the savannah” (*Ninety-Two Days* 62), Mr Todd conversely embodies the tenets of hospitality to its extremes. But underneath Mr Todd’s politeness as a host are sinister and selfish motives – motives, Waugh suggests, brought into being by spiritual poverty, illustrating the fundamental flaw in humanist belief. While Mr Todd promises he will “take care” of Tony (210), when it becomes evident that Tony is looking to find a way home to England, he merely states Tony is “under no restraint,” knowing Tony lacks the resources or skills to leave of his own accord (214). Similarly, when Tony refuses to read *Martin Chuzzlewit*, Mr Todd deprives him of food. This behaviour culminates at a “local feast day” (219), an event that Mr Todd manufactures in order to ensure the search party looking for Tony leave thinking he is dead. Tony is given a significant amount of presumably spiked *piwari*, a fermented alcoholic drink, and falls into a drug-induced sleep, missing the feast entirely, leaving Mr Todd to imply to the searchers that Tony has died. In manipulating indigenous ritual for devious and selfish means, Mr Todd empties the event of its sacred qualities – and in doing so, condemns Tony to a monotonous eternity of reading Dickens. The City reflects Waugh’s affective experience of reaching his destination in Brazil, where “the Boa Vista of my imagination had come to grief” and he was plunged into endless ennui (*Ninety-Two Days* 87). The chapter’s closing lines explicate the never-ending horror in store for Tony: “[w]e will not have any Dickens today... but tomorrow, and the day after that, and the day after that. Let us read *Little Dorrit* again. There are passages in that book I can never hear without

the temptation to weep" (221). If hospitality is a Christian virtue, hostility is a sin, and for his failure as a host, Tony receives the eternal punishment Matthew describes in the Bible. Tony becomes a tortured guest isolated from his home, trapped by a sinister host in a hellish version of never-ending hospitality.

The jungle setting, with its unsettling parasitic creatures, proffers Waugh the opportunity to delve further into the host/guest dynamic: both *Ninety-Two Days* and *A Handful of Dust* feature vivid descriptions of creepy-crawlies burrowing and biting their way into fleshy bodies that become their hosts. John Bowen extends this parasitism to Waugh's troubled relationship with Dickens, arguing their writings "act as both parasite and host to each other" (138). Hospitality, too, is open to parasitism: Derrida writes that the word "allows itself to be parasitized by its opposite, 'hostility,' the undesirable guest" ("Hostipitality" 3), while Beerbohm warns of the potential guest-as-parasite (145). While not all guests are necessarily pests, the pesky guest is still, nonetheless, a guest, and hosts must treat them with decorum. As Heaton describes in *The Perfect Hostess*, this creates an affective double bind for the host: even the pest who "kept her bell in constant peals" and "never was in time for meals" must be readmitted as a guest when they unexpectedly return, having "missed the train" (2). Waugh was familiar with this situation, having been a pest himself during his attempts to leave Boa Vista. His departure became a sequence of "slapstick farce" as he was twice forced to turn back: his host at the Benedictine mission expresses "undisguised despair" upon Waugh's second unexpected return (*Ninety-Two Days* 103). Indeed, the Brazil scenes bring into focus the parasitic things that appear regularly across the entirety of *A Handful of Dust*: most evidently through Beaver, with his animal name, unexpected arrival at Hetton, and his habit of pouncing on last-minute luncheon invitations, but also the "worms" inside John Andrew's favourite horse (55), the lingering "heavy odour" of the perfume worn by Jenny Abdul Akbar, one of Brenda's London friends (86),

and the eleventh-hour addition of Milly's daughter Winnie to the trip to Brighton.¹³

Waugh's mode of writing in *A Handful of Dust*, satire, is itself parasitic: a type of "piracy," as Test writes, that steals "its laughter-provoking devices and techniques" from other modes (26). The parasitic themes in the text speak to Waugh's concerns: secularity itself is parasitic to religion and threatens to consume its host entirely.

As the novels examined in this chapter attest, Waugh framed modern parties in largely negative ways. These texts offer a reading of interwar festivity that positions the party as a site not for celebration and pleasurable emotions, but where hospitality gives way to a uniquely modern form of sociability that is shallow and scheming. Waugh's dismay at the decline of hospitality manifests in a series of parties that show the chaotic consequences of the destruction of the host/guest relationship. At the same time, these representations of parties evidence Waugh's complex attitudes towards modernity in the interwar years. While he laments the disorder, emptiness, and hostility of modern parties, he simultaneously relies on and relishes in the fodder these events supply his darkly comic craft. *Decline and Fall* frames parties as dynamic events devoid of hospitality's disciplining logic, establishing the centrality of party scenes to Waugh's work and critique. In *Vile Bodies*, parties are everyday events, and partygoers are stripped of any interiority, leaving them unable to enforce the structures hospitality brings. *A Handful of Dust* suggests humanism and secularity are

¹³ Like Beaver, Flora Poste in Gibbons's *Cold Comfort Farm* is a parasite, because she lives off the generosity and hospitality of her distant relatives. However, Flora openly labels herself as such. When Flora initially explains her plan to her friend, Mrs Smiling, she proposes they have an evening out in London to "celebrate the inauguration of my career as a parasite" (15). Later in the novel, she is compared to a "mosquito" (207). Flora's parasitism, however, is largely presented positively: she must infiltrate the Starkadders in order to transform them into civilised beings. For Waugh, however, parasitism leads to the downfall of civilisation itself.

squarely to blame for the emergence of a modern brand of hospitality devoid of Christian values and filled with unpleasurable affect. Each novel depicts the double edge of hospitality inherent in the term's etymology – truly expounding “the age-long hostility of host and guest.”

What sort of party, then, did Waugh enjoy? His 1930 essay, “Parties One Likes – And Some Others,” first published in the *Daily Mail*, provides a hint. Foreshadowing his commentary in “The Hospitality of Campion Hall,” Waugh writes that the best party is “the nondescript party where the guests have been invited from sheer friendliness and nothing else” (334). The nondescript party, Waugh argues, is the ideal site to foment organic interaction and thought: “[i]t is at just these gatherings that the great men over a game of halma come to some momentous political decision, the famous painters draw comic cartoons on half sheets of newspaper, and the serious philosophers write very unserious limericks” (334). It is only in an environment of genial and genuine hospitality, for Waugh, that true sociability can take place. As the following chapter will show, Waugh's desire for festive order was shared by Gibbons, whose novels display a distinctly middlebrow sensibility in their championing of rationality and pragmatism. Unlike Waugh, however, Gibbons presented parties in a decidedly more optimistic light.

Chapter 4

Aspiration and Transformation: Stella Gibbons's Everyday Heroines

The foreword of Stella Gibbons's *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932) takes the form of a letter from the author to the esteemed fictional writer Anthony Pookworthy, explaining the process of writing the novel. As Gibbons's nephew and biographer Reggie Oliver claims, Hugh Walpole served as the model for Pookworthy, whom Gibbons saw as representing all that was wrong with a "self-congratulatory literary establishment" (*Out* 76). In the foreword, Gibbons mockingly comments that she fears the time she has spent "in the meaningless and vulgar bustle of newspaper offices" may have affected her "output of pure literature" (5). While during her journalism career she learned "to say exactly what I meant in short sentences," she knows "to achieve literature and favourable reviews" as a novelist, she must write "as though I were not quite sure about what I meant but was jolly well going to say something all the same" (5–6). However, she acknowledges that readers like her — those who also "work in the vulgar and meaningless bustle" — struggle to recognise "whether a sentence is Literature or whether it is just sheer flapdoodle" (6). As Gibbons observed in a 1980 interview, her intended audience was the "ordinary reader" (qtd. in Moorsom 57). Much of the novel's appeal is in its advocacy of simple rather than purple prose, the latter of which is jokingly marked by asterisks to help the supposedly bewildered reader identify it.

Both the foreword and interview reveal *Cold Comfort Farm*'s anti-elitist project, a recurrent theme across Gibbons's work. For Hammill, Gibbons's ridicule of the literary elite and subsequent appeal to the common reader in the foreword shows her middlebrow position ("*Cold*" 838). The middlebrow, as Hammill suggests, is characterised by its interest in "style, taste, imitation and social performance" (*Women* 5), making the party — which requires specialised modes of appearance and behaviour — an essential area of study in middlebrow texts. In this chapter, I contend that the middlebrow qualities of Gibbons's prose, and her awareness of her audience, are significant in understanding her approach to

parties, even though she would not have necessarily used the term “middlebrow” herself. The parties in three of Gibbons’s interwar novels—*Cold Comfort Farm* (1932), *Bassett* (1934), and *Nightingale Wood* (1938)—show the transformative potential of festivity. Gibbons focuses on everyday heroines: spinsters, widows, rural women, and working women. In these novels, these women all undergo a transformation before attending a party outside their usual set of society. Their transformations result in a number of positive outcomes, such as love, marriage, friendship, and renewed levels of self-confidence.

The success of Gibbons’s heroines at parties displays the aspirational qualities of the middlebrow. In these novels, parties are sites of social mobility, allowing characters to transcend class boundaries. As Hammill and Michelle Smith argue, “self-improvement is the central ideal of middlebrow culture” (12). Beth Driscoll similarly observes that the middlebrow is “earnest,” concerned with social and self-improvement (40). As these novels show, Gibbons recognised that her characters’ participation in these parties could encourage her readers to aspire to do the same. The transformations her characters undergo are at times radical but in no sense are they unrealistic. The heroine becomes the belle of the ball, but she achieves this by highly practical means: buying a new dress on sale, taking advice or inspiration from certain texts, or getting a stylish haircut. Such pragmatic approaches make these aspirations seem attainable, meaning Gibbons’s parties, in their transformative potential, also empower their middlebrow audience. The middlebrow, though, relates to more than just fiction: it extends into other textual cultures. As my analyses of *Vogue* and *Good Housekeeping* in this chapter show, interwar middlebrow periodicals also endorsed a form of aspiration that was mediated by pragmatism. Reading Gibbons’s novels alongside these magazines achieves a richer, more informed understanding of the party between the wars.

Much interwar criticism of the middlebrow is concerned with the disquieting way in which the middlebrow assumes familiarity with both high and low culture. Woolf famously

described the middlebrow as someone “of middlebred intelligence who ambles [...] in pursuit of no single object, neither art itself nor life itself, but both mixed indistinguishably, and rather nastily, with money, fame, power, or prestige” (“Middlebrow” 115). The growth of middlebrow studies over the last four decades, however, has reclaimed the middlebrow as a valuable cultural category, presenting its texts in a more positive light. Still, the middlebrow continues to be a somewhat hazily defined and discussed concept, often deployed in studies of early twentieth-century literature to describe those texts and authors that are not modernist. However, as Emma Sterry observes, the idea that modernism and the middlebrow are binary opposites “obscures how the taxonomies of the terms are actually quite different” (9). In this chapter, I present the middlebrow as a cultural category referring to both texts and audiences. My approach affirms Driscoll’s assertion that “[t]o understand the middlebrow [...] we must look at how people engage with books as well as the books themselves” (11). While Driscoll’s claim is made in relation to the twenty-first-century middlebrow, it is also pertinent to the interwar middlebrow. As Humble argues, the “generic identity” of the middlebrow novel in the first half of the twentieth century is “established through a complex interplay between texts and the desires and self-images of their readers” (*Feminine Middlebrow Novel* 5). The textual conventions of middlebrow fiction and other media thus emerge out of and are responses to its audience’s needs and desires. In the case of Gibbons’s novels, parties are a recurrent textual convention that interrogates the relaxing – yet still contested – attitudes towards social mixing and mobility that emerged during the 1930s.

Gibbons had an attentive eye towards the way parties are structured and unfold, as seen in the short story “Tame Wild Party.” Published in *Nash’s Pall Mall Magazine* in 1933, the story follows Joyce, a secretary stuck at a party where she knows none of the guests. Joyce hides in the hostess’s bedroom for much of the story, and these scenes are contrasted with commentary from a third-person observer-narrator on the party’s progress.

Throughout the piece, the narrator introduces six stages of a given party. The first four stages are “the Frozen, the Anecdotal, the Amorous and Belligerent,” and most parties reach stage five, “the Feats of Physical Strength Stage,” “about three hours after they start” (124). Stage six is “Regrets For a Mis-Spent Past,” where everyone dances “languidly” or sits “about in clots, regretting” (125). In suggesting a sort of stultifying congealment is central to a party drawing to a close, Gibbons presents parties as cyclical: they begin as frozen, thaw, then freeze up again at their end. This meticulous step-by-step dissection of the different stages every party goes through exemplifies Gibbons’s highly methodical and detailed observations of festivity. Gibbons’s own experiences at parties perhaps contributed to this consciousness: Oliver’s biography paints Gibbons as someone who preferred to remain silently at the periphery, observing the behaviour of others. In the 1920s she found herself in a “rather intellectual set” whose loose bohemian ways would later serve as satirical inspiration for *Cold Comfort Farm*’s Mr Mybug (Oliver, *Out* 40). After the success of *Cold Comfort Farm*, she was “bewildered” and “indifferent” towards her own celebrity (126), and as a whole, she did not enjoy literary parties (130).

“Tame Wild Party” is just one of the many pieces Gibbons published in magazines during the 1930s: other work appeared in the *Bystander*, the *Evening Standard*, *Good Housekeeping*, the *Lady*, and *Time and Tide*. A journalist prior to the success of *Cold Comfort Farm*, Gibbons was strongly embedded in interwar periodical culture. Having worked for the British United Press, the *Evening Standard*, and the *Lady* before turning to fiction writing full time, Gibbons possessed an insider’s view of magazines. As the foreword of *Cold Comfort Farm* establishes, much of Gibbons’s rationality and pragmatism comes from her journalism career. In her novels, she transfers this rationality to periodicals – whether that be the working girls’ title *Red Letter* or sophisticated volumes of *Vogue* – demonstrating their power as instructive and transformative objects.

In the three novels discussed in this chapter — *Cold Comfort Farm*, *Bassett*, and *Nightingale Wood* — parties generate transformation and aspiration for characters and readers alike. Given the centrality of magazines in the novels studied here and to middlebrow culture more broadly, this chapter draws primarily upon interwar periodicals for its historical source material, notably *Vogue* and *Good Housekeeping*. In *Cold Comfort Farm*, texts are central to the transformation of Elfine Starkadder and Aunt Ada Doom. In particular, the fictional philosophy book *The Higher Common Sense*, championed by the novel's protagonist Flora Poste, provides a procedure for navigating life, sociability, and festivity. *Bassett* displays the transformative power of clothing, showing how a new evening gown can have positive, long-lasting effects upon its wearer. The publication history of *Nightingale Wood* illuminates its aspirational qualities: initially serialised in *Good Housekeeping*, the novel deliberately targets the periodical's audience by suggesting frugal and pragmatic approaches to festivity. Central to all these parties, however, is the privileging of the everyday heroine, a figure relatable to Gibbons's middlebrow audience and whose aspirations align with their own.

The Higher Common Sense: *Cold Comfort Farm*

Reflecting on *Cold Comfort Farm*'s success in *Punch* in 1966, Gibbons comments that during the process of writing the novel she was certain "calmness, the comic vision, and common sense would finally tidy up anything" ("Genesis" 578). Scholars frequently identify this practical sensibility as central to the novel's critique (see, for example: Greenberg 100; Hammill, "Cold" 838; Milthorpe, *Evelyn Waugh's Satire* 57). However, little discussion has unpacked what Gibbons's brand of common sense constitutes. After all, as Sophia A. Rosenfeld notes, common sense is regularly taken for granted because of its banality (1). A

closer interrogation of common sense in *Cold Comfort Farm* is key to understanding Gibbons's approach to festivity as a transformative event.

Set "in the near future" (2), *Cold Comfort Farm* centres on Flora Poste, a young upper-middle-class woman who is suddenly orphaned and left with an income of one hundred pounds a year. Resolving to live off her relatives' generosity instead of finding employment, Flora moves to Cold Comfort Farm in Sussex, home to her distant cousins, the Starkadders. During her stay, Flora gradually organises the lives of her untidy relations, who are fond of loud, irrational arguments, stewing over problems, and throwing each other down wells. The most significant opponent to her project is Aunt Ada Doom, the family matriarch who is traumatised from seeing something nasty in the woodshed as a child. Only once Flora succeeds in fixing up Cold Comfort Farm does she allow her own happy ending, leaving the farm to pursue love and marriage. While there are clear indicators of the novel's futuristic setting throughout—such as references to video phones, the increased accessibility of civil aviation, and the gentrification of London districts such as Lambeth—the novel largely reflects the period of its publication in its form and content (and in its depiction of sociability). But, as these social and technological changes suggest, Gibbons's vision for the future is a democratising one that celebrates the opportunities modernity brings for positive transformation.

Because the novel's plot involves an urban woman instilling progression in a group of country people continually shown as non-progressive, critics regularly position *Cold Comfort Farm* as a parody of the rural novel, particularly the work of Mary Webb and Sheila Kaye-Smith (see, for example: Greenberg 102; Hammill, "Cold"; Reisman 32). While the novel's mocking invocation of purple prose provides much of its hilarity, its intertextuality is more complex. A series of other texts make appearances throughout, including Hollywood and experimental cinema, *Vogue* magazine, Victorian novels, tales of childbirth

from women novelists, and the work of D. H. Lawrence, Austen, and the Brontës. Texts saturate *Cold Comfort Farm* and play a crucial role in the novel's festivities.

As Humble argues, the act of reading is a "fundamental trope" in middlebrow novels, indicating an ongoing interest in how different readers respond to a variety of texts (*Feminine Middlebrow Novel* 46). Reading often serves "instructive" purposes, functioning as a guide for the novel's characters (47). *Cold Comfort Farm's* parties demonstrate the transformative power of texts and their potential for civilising effects. As Milthorpe points out, the novel is an "exploration of literature's signal power to bring order (or chaos) to the world" (*Evelyn Waugh's Satire* 57). The novel's parties – Richard Hawk-Monitor's birthday ball, the Counting, and Richard and Elfine's wedding reception – convey *Cold Comfort Farm's* explicit judgements about which texts lead to positive outcomes. All texts have the power to transform: however, not all advocate the commonsensical approach to life that Gibbons and Flora champion. The right texts teach their readers how to orientate themselves towards a party consciousness that focuses upon correct modes of behaviour, styles of dress, and topics of conversation. In doing so, these texts give their audience the ability to approach life with a common-sense frame of mind. In the novel, two of the Starkadders, Elfine and Aunt Ada, reveal their transformation at a party, showing they have chosen rationality over irrationality. Flora – as the embodiment of common sense – acts as an arbiter of taste, directing both women to the texts that change their ways.

Common sense is always political: as Hannah Arendt observes, it is "the political sense par excellence" (387). For Arendt, common sense relates people to each other and the world: it establishes boundaries for how their lives (at least in the public sphere) advance (Rosenfeld 252). But while the term is often deployed to indicate a shared set of ideas drawn from everyday experience (Rosenfeld 1), in doing so it often becomes exclusionary. As Ann Laura Stoler comments, common sense "adjudicates normalities and enlists prescription to the salient borders it defines and polices" (273). These boundaries, as Rosenfeld points out,

illuminate “the common sense of particular peoples in opposition to the perceived nonsense of others” (238). In *Cold Comfort Farm*, common sense aligns with the middlebrow and the middle class; as Hammill notes, the implied reader of the novel is “intelligent but commonsensical” (*Women* 156). For Gibbons, common sense implies pragmatism and practicality: while the Starkadders’ excessive emotions lead to irrationality, and the novel’s highbrow intellectuals overcomplicate everything, Flora is an emblem of what a level-headed approach to life can achieve. Through careful and reasoned contemplation of the correct texts, Gibbons suggests, anyone can achieve Flora’s cool composure.

Two authors provide the guiding values for Flora’s approach to life: Austen, and the Abbé Fausse-Maigre, a fictional French philosopher. The novel’s early sections signal the importance of these figures. Flora tells her friend Mrs Smiling that she has “much in common with Miss Austen,” because “[s]he liked everything to be tidy and pleasant and comfortable about her, and so do I” (19). Austen’s neat plots are not dissimilar to Flora’s vision for her life: like a novelist, she has already planned how her narrative will unfold. The Abbé’s *Pensées*, meanwhile, is the sole book Flora brings in her travelling-case for the journey to Cold Comfort. Flora’s decision to include the book — “the wisest book ever compiled for the guidance of a truly civilized person” — is because she thinks it will be “easier to meet the Starkadders in a proper and civilized frame of mind” (47). Hammill reads the novel’s frequent deployment of the term “civilised” as connoting sophistication (*Sophistication* 139), but it is also code for a series of other largely metropolitan values, such as tidiness, rationality, pleasantness, and having common sense. Civilised behaviour, in Flora’s mind, embodies Austen and the Abbé’s principles. The Starkadders — defined by their ruralness — are immediately coded as civility’s antithesis.

Waugh equates civilisation with Catholicism and savagery with modernity and secularity: grand narratives that apply to society as a whole. Gibbons is conversely more interested in the individual, connecting civilisation to measured self-improvement and

savagery to emotional excess. Flora invokes Enlightenment-era ideals of civilisation and civility: in championing the Abbé and Austen, she emphasises the centrality of personal advancement. Raymond Williams traces twentieth-century understandings of “civilisation” to the Enlightenment, arguing it promotes a “sense of historical process” but “celebrates the associated sense of modernity,” which gives way to “an achieved condition of refinement and order” (*Keywords* 58). But civilisation, civilised, and civility are all loaded terms, especially in light of the interwar period. As Richard Overy shows, the years between the wars were freighted by concerns that civilisation was in crisis (14–15). The discourse surrounding these anxieties largely played out through written forms (18), evidenced in works such as J. M. Kenworthy’s *Will Civilisation Crash?* (1927), Clive Bell’s polemic *Civilization* (1928), and Freud’s *Civilization and its Discontents*, which was first published in English in 1930. Despite this litany of commentary, there was no consistent definition of civilisation, and the concept was “all too often taken for granted” (Overy 22). Civilisation also carries colonial and imperial implications, a troping *Cold Comfort Farm* relies on. The first meeting between Flora and Judith is equated to Columbus meeting “the poor Indian”: Flora is the civiliser, the Starkadders the savages (49; see also Greenberg 95). Gibbons’s understanding of civilisation, with its basis in Enlightenment and colonial ways of thought, is undoubtedly a Western view. Gibbons’s brand of civilised behaviour and civility emphasises the role of the individual in this process: civilisation is reliant upon each person discovering how to correct their behaviour and actions. The rhetoric that civilisation’s progress was dependent on individual self-improvement is echoed in the period’s etiquette guides. Woodman’s *Correct Conduct* (1922) observes “[w]ith the march of civilization, [...] nobody can pretend to be a reasonable subject unless he models his actions upon the accepted notions of those with whom he comes in contact” (v). If “this code” were “to be ignored,” Woodman writes, “life could not proceed in an orderly manner” (v). Individual

action generates a collective result. Gibbons's idea of the individual, then, is always bounded by social and cultural conventions.

The strongest corollary between civilised behaviour and common sense is the Abbé's *The Higher Common Sense*, which "outline[s] a philosophy for the Civilized Being" (58). While the *Pensées* "fortify [...] against everyday pricks and scourges," *The Higher Common Sense* guides its readers through "dilemma[s] of the Aunt Ada type" (58). The book's title gestures to its project. A "higher" common sense – suggesting importance, advancement, coming from a place above – is required to combat an object of extreme uncivility. To have common sense entails both self-management and managing those around you who may be uncivilised. A passage late in the novel explains Gibbons's understanding of the higher common sense. As Flora pores over the book, trying to find a way to approach the Aunt Ada problem, the novel's narrator comments: "Passion, awed, slunk back to its lair; and divine Reason and her sister Love, locked in one another's arms, raised their twin heads to receive the wreath of Happiness" (206). Passion is coded with animalistic tropes, pointing to its capacity for savagery, while Reason and Love are personified as humans, implying refinement. By privileging reason over emotional excess, *The Higher Common Sense* suggests, one will receive fulfilment via love and happiness.

Flora turns to Austen and the Abbé in times of crisis: they are a textual means for finding composure and the best way to move forward. These texts instruct Flora on how to tackle the various problems of the Starkadders and shape them into more rational beings. While Flora transforms almost all of the farm's residents throughout the novel, her transformation of her cousin Elfine is one of her most significant projects. Just seventeen-years-old, Elfine spends most of her time wandering hills and writing poetry, habits Flora fears will eventually make her "go all arty-and-crafty about the feet and waist" (61). When Flora learns there is a blossoming relationship between Elfine and Richard Hawk-Monitor, the local squire, she resolves that Elfine "must be civilized" to secure what would be a

highly advantageous marriage. She subsequently obtains an invitation for herself and Elfine to attend Richard's twenty-first birthday ball (113). While Flora herself "loathe[s] parties" (27), she recognises their importance because of their potential for advancing social status and romantic connection. Flora sees her transformation of Elfine as pivotal to her plan to loosen Aunt Ada's control over the farm's residents. Moreover, if she is successful, she will be able to prove the superiority of common sense: "[i]t would be a triumph of the Higher Common Sense over Aunt Ada Doom. It would be a victory for Flora's philosophy of life over the sub-conscious life-philosophy of the Starkadders" (134). Common sense, then, for Flora, is a means for gaining preeminence: it evidences that such a chaotic world can be brought to order.

Flora's plan for Elfine is two-fold: she aims to change her appearance and her behaviour, as "[h]er mind must match the properly groomed head in which it was housed" (129). As such, the texts Elfine engages with during her transformation tackle both these areas, including *Vogue* magazine, sketches of lingerie, Austen's novels, Marie Laurencin's paintings, and excerpts from the Abbé's *Pénsees*. In particular, Flora instructs Elfine to read "Our Lives from Day to Day," an article from *Vogue*. A real and regular column in the magazine during the interwar years, the articles are a commentary on recent social events written from the perspective of an anonymous socialite. For instance, in June 1931, the column notes "we have two summer seasons – before and after Ascot – the one youthful, pretty and rather ingenuous, the other, now commencing, sophisticated and critical – even at moments a little bored" ("Our Lives from Night to Night" 51). Observations on fashion are also integral to the column. While men's party attire "continues to be varied only very slightly," an article from 1933 notes, there has never been "such astonishing variety in the fashions of lovely women" ("Our Lives from Day to Day" 53). Each guest's dress is described in detail: "[h]ere is Mrs. Armstrong-Jones, in black taffeta with grey and white plaid round the neck, [...] Mrs. Archie Campbell in flowered organza (which is organdie

gone grand and silky), and no jewels" (53). Mostly focused on who was where wearing what, the "Our Lives" series offers little in the way of real moral instruction but implies there is value in sophisticated clothing: the material influences the social. Rather than the grand, all-encompassing philosophy of *The Higher Common Sense*, the "Our Lives" articles—with their emphasis on the day-to-day—are *Vogue's* guide to the minutiae of everyday (yet sophisticated) life. Indeed, Flora's justification for making Elfine read the article is not due to it imparting any real "life-philosophy" but "because you will have to meet people who do that kind of thing, and you must on no account be all dewy and awed when you do meet them" (136). Common sense, then, is also the ability to read different situations perceptively and pragmatically. For example, while Flora reluctantly concedes that Elfine can continue to write poetry, she emphasises that Elfine must not divulge this to those in Richard's society: an act that consciously crafts Elfine's social front.

Flora's endorsement of *Vogue* as a suitable transformative text aligns with *Vogue's* own positioning of the magazine in their advertising. In an issue of the regular supplement *Vogue Pattern Book* in 1933, an advertisement asks the reader: "[y]ou read *Vogue* but do you really use it?" (figure 4.1). Taking the reader through the various regular features in the magazine, such as "High Fashion," "Fashions for Limited Incomes," and "Hostess and Decorating Pages," the advertisement concludes with an assertive claim: "[w]ith all its chic and elegance, *Vogue* is essentially a practical magazine. Study it carefully, use it intelligently, and it will save you time, save you trouble, save you money." Much like Flora's measured approach, *Vogue* promises an active engagement with the magazine's contents will transform the reader into someone who is also chic, elegant, and practical.

YOU READ VOGUE BUT DO YOU REALLY USE IT?

VOGUE'S HIGH FASHION

Vogue's High Fashion sets a standard by which you can judge everything you see offered for sale in your own shops, at the prices you can afford to pay. What if you don't need a single one of the London and Paris models shown in any issue of Vogue? Use them as a measure of the frocks you do need, and so never buy a too-popular or a waning style.

VOGUE'S ACCESSORIES AND BEAUTY ARTICLES

Every illustration in Vogue is a lesson in the art of combining details to make a perfect whole. Study the drawings and photographs, not only for the frocks, but for the hats, shoes, gloves, that go with them. Special articles on double- or triple-duty accessories and on inexpensive beauty treatments show the economical way to chic and good grooming.

VOGUE'S PATTERN SERVICE

In every issue of Vogue you will find pages of new Vogue Pattern designs, issued in advance of the next Pattern Book. Periodically, Vogue selects from these patterns wardrobes for every woman's needs, chooses the right material, finds the correct accessories, and tells you where to buy them.

SMART FASHIONS FOR LIMITED INCOMES

This section shows the woman with a modest dress allowance how to achieve chic at small expense. It tells her how to adapt the new mode to her own needs and means. It points out the best bargains and where they are to be found. It selects inexpensive clothes for children, the young girl, the older woman. It gives ideas for things you can make at home, to give chic to a little frock or freshen up a tired wardrobe. Its knitting and embroidery designs are famous.

VOGUE'S HOSTESS AND DECORATING PAGES

Vogue tells you the little, subtle, important things that mark the perfection of entertaining and service. Every one of the lovely houses shown in Vogue has its graceful suggestions to offer for the solution of your own decorating problems. There are also instructions for any number of little things you can make yourself, now that the smart world's interest in hand work has been revived.

With all its chic and elegance, Vogue is essentially a practical magazine. Study it carefully, use it intelligently, and it will save you time, save you trouble, save you money.

Figure 4.1: Advertisement for *Vogue*, *Vogue Pattern Book*, December 1933–January 1934, p. 49.
© The Condé Nast Publications Ltd.

The final step in Elfine's transformation is two days in London, where she receives a "fiendishly expensive" haircut, and Flora spends fifty guineas on Elfine's bespoke white satin dress (144). But more importantly for the novel's commentary on the power of texts are the entertainments Flora and Elfine enjoy during their stay. The time in the metropole is an opportunity for Flora "to indulge herself in some civilized pleasures," and she attends a performance of Mozart while her friend Julia takes Elfine shopping, an explicit alignment of urbanity with civility and sophistication (145). Later, Flora suggests the trio see "*Manallalive-O!*", a "Neo-Expressionist" play with "seventeen scenes and only one character," so Elfine "know[s] what to avoid when she is married" (146). However, Julia suggests seeing the variety show "*On Your Toes!*" instead, and they have "a nice time instead of a nasty one" (146). Not all texts are pleasurable or worth following, showing that having common sense entails possessing the competency to distinguish between what is "nice" and will lead to personal enjoyment and improvement (classical music and cheery theatre) and what is "nasty" (experimental drama). Julia's undercutting of Flora's plans may deny Elfine the teachable moment, but in doing so, it becomes a teachable moment for the novel's implied middlebrow reader. From the lengthy and comical description of *Manallalive-O!*'s form, plot, and various settings, the reader knows the play is ridiculous and therefore best avoided.¹

With Elfine's transformation complete, she is "groomed and normal," yet her personality still suggests "cool, smoothly-blowing winds" (146). By changing aspects of Elfine's appearance and behaviour, Flora shows Elfine how to revise her social front so she

¹ The description is too long to repeat in full here, but in short, the play centres on a restaurant waiter who dreams he is a steward on a cruise liner. Upon waking up and realising he is still a restaurant waiter, he "shoots his reflection in a mirror and dies" (146). The scenes take place in locales such as "a lavatory," "a room in a leper's settlement," and "the middle of Piccadilly Circus" (146).

projects refinement, rather than the untidiness of the rest of the Starkadders. In doing so, Flora shifts Elfine's orientation from a direction that is coded as uncivilised to one that is civilised. This process creates new possibilities for Elfine: things previously intangible, such as marriage to Richard, become tangible. Ahmed argues that not all objects are visible to a person because they may be orientated in a different direction: objects can be "'beyond the horizon' of the body, and thus out of reach," meaning "bodies are shaped by what is reachable" (*Queer Phenomenology* 55). It is only through Flora's intervention, Gibbons suggests, that the Starkadders can become rational beings.

The ball itself proceeds in a "Cinderella" fashion (154): Elfine's grand entrance into the ball brings "[a] low hum of admiration," and Flora observes that Richard is "deeply in love" (156–57). Flora deems the ball a civilised success, something the narrative continually reiterates. The party successfully brings together the material, spatial, and social: it combines the essentials of "too many guests in a smallish room" with "the elegance and lavishness of the supper-tables," "the sober richness" of the décor, and "the fact that most of the people who were present knew each other slightly" (158). Like "all good parties," there is an "aroma of enjoyment and gaiety" (160). The event reaches its peak when Elfine and Richard announce their engagement, leaving Flora feeling "as though she had shaken her fist in the face of Aunt Ada" (163). However, Aunt Ada takes the gloss off the fairytale evening: the group return home to find she has decided to convene the Counting, an annual event held to check how many Starkadders have died during the year. While the Counting is a serious event for the farm's residents, Gibbons uses it to parody the cliff-hanger endings characteristic of serialised rural novels. Gibbons was intimately familiar with the conventions of the rural novel, having been tasked with writing plot summaries of Webb's

The Golden Arrow (1916) during its serialisation in the *Evening Standard*.² The thrilling conclusion to Chapter 15, as Flora, Elfine, and Seth see Cold Comfort in the distance — “the windows of the farm were ablaze with light!” — is instantly undercut by the first sentence of the next chapter: “[p]erhaps ‘ablaze’ is too strong a word” (167–68). With such a deflationary opening, the Counting has no basis to be taken seriously. Elfine describes the Counting as “the family party,” but Flora resolutely refuses to label it so: “[n]onsense! You don’t have parties at places like Cold Comfort” (168). For Flora, parties at Cold Comfort are impossible because there is not enough organisation amongst its inhabitants. While the Hawk-Monitor ball contains “all the ingredients for success,” none of these qualities are found at Cold Comfort in its present state (158).

Flora and the novel’s narrator frequently compare the rural Starkadders to emblems of modernity: for instance, Flora and Seth’s first meeting reminds her of conversations had “at parties in Bloomsbury” (82). This conflation between the rural and modern reaches its peak at the Counting. Flora compares the initial scene to the “Chamber of Horrors at Madame Tussaud’s” (170), Urk’s facial expression is a “Japanese Hō-mask” (169), reflecting the newly-found interest in *Noh* by modernist dramatists, and upon seeing Aunt Ada, Flora concludes “if Aunt Ada was mad, then she, Flora, was one of the Marx Brothers” (171). As it reaches four in the morning, Flora feels as if she is attending “one of Eugene O’Neill’s plays” (177). By bringing lowbrow and highbrow, rural and urban, and popular and modernist together, Gibbons highlights the instability of, and then collapses, these binaries. The emotions of the rural Starkadders are excessive and grotesque, but when transfigured onto the cosmopolitan modernist stage, such affect becomes legitimised experimentalism. But as

² Gibbons’s mocking descriptions show frustration at *The Golden Arrow*’s dramatics: “Eli becomes enraged with his daughter because she has decked herself out with cheap finery for the benefit of Joe and in his fury cuts off Lily’s long golden hair” (qtd. in Oliver, *Out* 65).

Flora asserts, neither the Starkadders nor the modernists are civilised, because of their lack of middle-ground common sense.

The Counting acts as an immediate contrast to the ball, displaying the destructive potential of uncivilised festivity. Chaos characterises the event: from Aunt Ada's repetitive utterance "I saw something nasty in the woodshed" (172), to the "goggle[d] eye[d] and beaky nose[d]" Rennett jumping down a well (173); from Amos's dramatic departure to preach his sermons around England, to Urk's unromantic declaration to the hired girl Meriam—"[c]ome, my beauty—my handful of dirt" (176). But the Counting is also the crisis point of the novel, marking where Flora's various plots come to a head. While it is chaotic, it sets into motion all Flora has arranged and provides the means for the novel's subsequent events to take place, displaying the moment when Aunt Ada's power over her family breaks down. As Mara Reisman observes, Aunt Ada tries to wrangle control over her family through texts with her copy of the *Milk Producers' Weekly Bulletin and Cowkeepers' Guide* much in the same way Flora relies on *The Higher Common Sense* (38). Unlike Flora, Aunt Ada's attempts at domination are physical rather than readerly, using the heavy tome to strike her family into submission. With Aunt Ada unable to keep all the Starkadders around her, the texts that Flora privileges begin to prevail.

With the majority of the Starkadders tidied up, Flora's attention turns to Aunt Ada as the day of Elfine's wedding draws closer. Again, she directs herself to *The Higher Common Sense*. As Flora rereads the book, she realises she may have to "meekly await the help of a flash of intuition," which *The Higher Common Sense* warns can occur with such extreme cases (206). This inspiration arrives not long after, when Flora is reading Austen's *Mansfield Park*. While the Abbé and Austen are the primary inspirations for Flora, it is only at this moment in the novel—Flora's greatest challenge—that the two are put in direct relation to each other. Flora quickly develops a plan which is both inspired by and makes use of texts. She takes a copy of *Vogue*, photographs of the actress Fanny Ward, and a brochure for the "Hôtel

Miramar" in Paris to Aunt Ada's room, and spends several hours with her (208). While Gibbons denies the reader the details of their conversation, it is later revealed that Flora uses the texts to show Aunt Ada "what a pleasant life could be had [...] by a handsome, sensible old lady of good fortune, blessed with a sound constitution and a firm will" (222). An outlook on life that emphasises being "sensible," "sound," and "firm," Flora suggests, leads to vastly more enjoyable outcomes. Flora's view stresses the centrality of pleasure, much like the middlebrow itself: middlebrow writers and institutions, as Humble points out, were cognisant that their products were "intimately connected [...] to the pleasure of the reader" ("Sitting" 50). The Starkadders have only ever known life as being full of emotional turmoil; but from Flora's middlebrow perspective, it is common sense to approach life in a reasoned manner.

Vogue is a common denominator in Aunt Ada and Elfine's transformations. While *Vogue* is often popularly imagined as a periodical targeted at the wealthy, it had a broader influence in the interwar years: as Jane Garrity notes, the magazine also appealed "to those who actively aspired to be members of the upper class" ("Selling" 33). The feature articles of *Vogue* during the early 1930s consciously acknowledge the magazine's aspirational audience. The regular section "Smart Fashions for Limited Incomes" featured "practical ideas for the woman of taste who cultivates chic on next to nothing a year" ("*Vogue's* Portfolio" 51), suggesting ways to update last year's wardrobe for less, alerting readers to the best sale deals from sales, and providing advice on when to splurge and save. While *Vogue* produced an image of femininity "in which appearance and taste were central" (Garrity, "Selling" 33), it was an image that sought to elide issues of income and class.

In its language, *Vogue* projects an aura of exclusivity while also acknowledging its aspirational potential, a strategy that Alice Wood observes is omnipresent in many fashion magazines of the period ("Modernism" 378). The reader – regardless of their actual circumstances or socioeconomic situation – becomes part of a sophisticated and elegant

public (378). In the pages of *Vogue*, this manifests in a complex narrative voice that is both instructive and inclusive: it assumes a level of cultural or sartorial knowledge on the part of the reader while also providing cues for the reader to attain this knowledge. For example, an article on “Dressing for the Court” promotes exclusivity through its topic – debutantes, of course, were upper-class – but its language speaks to a wider audience. While the article implies many of the issues it addresses are ones known to the reader (“[t]he question of the wrap to accompany a Court gown is always a problem”), the subsequent instruction suggests a more naïve reader through the imperative to “look” at one of the images in the magazine: “[l]ook, for instance at the white ermine cape-scarf shown in the photograph on this page. This type of wrap is the latest chic” (59). For both Elfine and Aunt Ada, *Vogue* is the ultimate transformative text because its manifestation of fashionableness advocates for refinement through practicality, a principal aspect of Gibbons’s middlebrow project.

Aunt Ada’s transformation is revealed at Elfine’s wedding reception, which is held at Cold Comfort. The guests arrive to see “a handsome old lady [...] in the smartest flying kit of black leather,” who announces she is departing in a plane for Paris in an hour (220). Importantly, much as in Elfine’s transformation, the changes in Aunt Ada still maintain many of her original qualities: as she tells Flora, “I will remember, my dear [...] to preserve my personality, as you advise,” remarking that she will not be found “plucking my eyebrows, nor dieting” (222). Common sense is not the same for everyone: instead, it is about finding a version of it that allows you to navigate life’s issues calmly while retaining your individualism and personality.

For Flora, Cold Comfort is originally deemed as an unsuitable place for a party. Her influence over the farm’s residents, however, in turns transforms the space they occupy. In becoming the venue for the wedding reception, Cold Comfort’s transformation is complete. It is “dirty and miserable and depressing no longer”: it has been “swept clean of straws and paper,” and there are “[c]heck curtains” and “rows of beans in red flower” (203–04). On the

day of the reception, the farm is “gay and cheerful,” and Flora is “utterly satisfied” with the farm’s appearance (214). Cold Comfort’s material and spatial alterations also reflect the new ways of its residents, who come to embody reasoned modes of sociality. At the wedding ceremony, Flora observes how the Starkadders have learned how to “just [enjoy] an ordinary human event, like any of the other millions of ordinary people in the world” (217). With Cold Comfort now being a conducive space for pleasant festive order through its material, spatial, and social elements, Flora’s work at the farm is done.

The novel’s tidy ending has somewhat puzzled critics: after seeing off Aunt Ada and Elfine, Flora herself is picked up by her love interest, Charles, and the pair fly off into a future of domestic bliss. Greenberg reads the conclusion as an indication of Gibbons’s weak adherence to her chosen genre, arguing that she gives the reader the requisite happy ending, but makes it deliberately unsatisfying to undermine convention (112–13).³ Wendy Parkins alternatively views Flora’s choice of country life in Hertfordshire with Charles as a response to the anxieties that the modern city generates for the feminine subject (131). Reisman argues the ending reinforces the novel’s narrative instability: the final departures of the three women confirm it is impossible to control the farm’s subjects once they leave its boundaries (45). However, while Flora’s exit is sudden, it is not entirely spontaneous: the reader is given several cues throughout that hint at Flora’s plans to leave. As Flora tells Mrs Smiling in the opening pages of the novel: “[w]hen I have found a relative who is willing to have me, I shall take him or her in hand, and alter his or her character and mode of living to suit my own taste. Then, when it pleases me, I shall marry” (14). Having exercised the calmness and reason required to organise the Starkadders, Flora is free to pursue love and happiness.

³ I return to the idea of weak commitments in Chapter 5, with my discussion of Mitford’s *Wigs on the Green*.

Spinsters and Working Women: *Bassett*

Marjorie Grant Cook, reviewing *Bassett* in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1934, writes that “[t]he tone of Miss Stella Gibbons’s new novel, *BASSETT* [...], is occasionally mildly satirical, but readers who hope for a repetition of the composite parody of ‘Cold Comfort Farm’ will be surprised to find a straightforward story of village life” (160). Given *Cold Comfort Farm*’s emphasis on extremes and excess, *Bassett* does initially appear a lesser text, lacking the comic force that Gibbons’s debut novel is so well known for. *Bassett* is, in many ways, a novel about everydayness: when taken on its own terms, it is a nuanced exploration of the contemporary questions surrounding class, identity, wealth, and work for women in interwar Britain.

The novel’s action centres on two intertwined stories, both taking place in the village of Bassett. The first story is that of Miss Baker, a London-based pattern-cutter who answers an advertisement for assistance converting a home into a boarding house. Travelling to Bassett, she meets the home’s owner, Miss Padsoe, an ageing spinster who has fallen into financial hardship. Miss Baker is initially unwilling to commit to the proposed partnership until she is suddenly made redundant by the paper pattern firm. Negotiating their class differences, the pair form an unlikely business relationship and friendship. The second story follows Queenie Catton, who takes up a position in Bassett as a companion to the wealthy Mrs Shelling. Queenie becomes close friends with Mrs Shelling’s adult children, George and Bell, who introduce her to their world of glamour and refinement. Class is the dominant theme throughout the novel, which chronicles the relationships between the declining old upper class, the new plutocracy, and working women.

Class is primarily explored in this novel through the idea of patterns: the sartorial patterns of dresses, the personal and social expectations that are inscribed upon individuals, and how they interconnect and influence one another. My discussion follows on from Vike

Martina Plock's recent analysis of patterns in the work of another interwar writer, Rosamond Lehmann. While Lehmann's novels are primarily interested in the adherence to patterns (Plock 111), *Bassett*, I argue, demonstrates its middlebrow qualities by focusing on how individuals can adapt or deviate from patterns in order to bring about positive change, something that Gibbons figures explicitly through dresses and dressmaking. While Gibbons's novels are indeed broadly concerned with the correctness of form and behaviour, they continue to emphasise the importance of individuality – that is, fluidity. In *Bassett*, the narrative's central party supplies the grounds for Miss Padsoe and Queenie to undergo a transformation in their dress, challenging the personal and social roles ascribed to them. The party functions as an uplifting space, acting as the means for providing the novel's heroines with their happy ending. However, while Miss Padsoe finds a fulfilling resolution to her issues at the novel's close, Queenie does not: failing to find fairytale romance in *Bassett*, she returns home to London devastated. But while Queenie's final situation may not resemble a conventional happy ending, Gibbons makes clear that her heartbreak is for the best. This attitude towards social patterns refracts in Gibbons's playful engagement with literary patterns. Conscious of her audience, Gibbons caters to their desires but refuses to wholly adhere to a formula, subverting some expectations while upholding others. In her refusal to grant a conventional happy ending, and in her positive portrayal of spinsters and landladies – who were subject to moral judgement in the interwar years – Gibbons demonstrates her middlebrow appeal.

Gibbons establishes the impetus for challenging patterns in *Bassett* through the presence of an everyday affect: disappointment. According to Hilary Hinds, it is a feeling ever-present in British interwar middlebrow fiction, a “polite, well-behaved, docile, almost decorous” emotion (294). Each of the four central women experience disappointment or are seen as disappointments in the first half of the novel. While three of the women want to continue in their current circumstances, the narrative makes clear that they are unviable or

unproductive options. It is only through a recalibration of their aspirations – breaking out of their patterns – that the characters can find fulfilment. Bell wishes for a lively social circle, but is left “disappointed” after a party she hosts is a failure (48); Miss Padsoe wants to continue living as a genteel woman, and has a “silly, sad, disappointed face” as she explains her dire situation to Miss Baker (36); and while Miss Baker hopes to continue working as a pattern-cutter, her “little world” is “blown to smithereens” by her redundancy (64). The character of Queenie, however, offers a slightly different take on disappointment. There is a “growing feeling” among Queenie’s middle-class London family that she is “a Disappointment” because she is not satisfying their expectation of doing meaningful work for the community (131). Queenie refuses to subscribe to this pattern but substitutes another in its place, that of a lady’s companion. As the narrative progresses, however, it becomes clear that this role is not right for her either, further emphasising Gibbons’s advocacy for individuality.

Oliver argues *Bassett*’s main fault is that Gibbons unevenly developed the two plotlines, making the plotline involving Queenie vastly more interesting than that of Miss Baker and Miss Padsoe (*Out* 131). But for scholars turning to *Bassett* in recent years, it is the latter narrative that dominates their analyses, as it provides a rich insight into the discourse surrounding single women and boarding homes in the 1930s (Briganti and Mezei 119; Mullholland 49). Miss Padsoe’s decision to convert her family’s Edwardian estate, The Tower, into a boarding house is reflective of the financial struggles encountered by genteel women in the aftermath of the First World War. Miss Padsoe’s privileged upbringing and gender mean she has “never been *trained* for any kind of work” with which to support herself (41). The First World War killed her two brothers, and her father has passed away, leaving her with two hundred pounds a year in income. However, the conversion of her home is not a natural choice: as Leonore Davidoff argues, taking in lodgers was an act of “moral opprobrium” in the early twentieth century (68–69). Lodgers transformed the private

space of the stately home into a public one, degrading the social status of the home's owners (69–70). Miss Padsoe “can’t bear to think of other people [...] coming to live in the house,” but she has no other means for assuring her financial security (33). Gibbons firmly establishes that Miss Padsoe’s hope to maintain a private home is not tenable. While the Shelling family, who have earned their fortune from recent business success, live in Baines House, which is “centrally heated [...] and run like a first-class hotel” (51), Miss Padsoe’s home is coded with Gothic tropes: it is “chill, airless and silent” (25). Miss Padsoe herself physically embodies her class’s decline: she is “shockingly thin” and only wears clothes seen “in old photographs of past Ascots” (29). The novel also frequently describes her as doing things “timidly” (100, 117, 150, 153) and looking “anxious” (78, 79, 101), and her speech is often inflected by italics and ellipses to emphasise her nervousness. As Ahmed writes, repeated “turns” of orientation lead bodies to take on the shape of that orientation (*Queer Phenomenology* 15): in the case of Miss Padsoe, the material and spatial elements around her come to directly impact upon her behaviour. The narrative makes clear that if Miss Padsoe were to stay in her pattern, it would be to her detriment.

While the plotline concerning Miss Padsoe is indeed the most critically rich for discussions of single women in the interwar period, in thinking about the novel’s patterns, *Bassett* must be read holistically. Miss Padsoe’s transformation is only set in motion after receiving an invitation to a party hosted by the Shelling siblings. This particular party diverges from the types of festivity established in the first half of the novel, where parties are exclusive to the rich. The wealthy Shelling siblings are highly sought-after because they are “an ornament to any party” (46). However, the parties the pair host fail to produce positive results. While George and Bell invite whatever “set” they are currently “trying out” — “the Motor Racing Set, the Good Time Set, the Literary Set” — they always conclude that the guests are “all bores” and return to each other’s company (47–48). It initially appears this party will be like these previous attempts: Bell begins by inviting guests “for whom she

did not care a hoot" (204). However, the pair later change tack, inviting Miss Padsoe, Miss Baker, and "all the really nice people whom they knew" (212). While the novel's narrator comments that "a sophisticated mind could barely conceive" such an odd assortment of guests, the party is "a radiant success" from the moment it begins (212-13). The party is "blessed by the very patron saint of parties" and is declared by its guests as "the most delicious party they had ever been to" (221-22). Gibbons explicitly gestures to the party's capacity to transform its guests:

But almost everyone else seemed transformed on that evening, fey and witched out of their everyday selves into a mood of gaiety and heedlessness. The mingling of old people and young ones proved a success: the party became a world in miniature and gaiety gained from contrast with sobriety. (216)

While the Shelling siblings host mediocre parties to reinforce their place in certain social circles, for Gibbons, parties are more successful and fulfilling when they include people one likes, regardless of class or age. It is only when parties are formed out of congeniality that its participants can be "witched out of their everyday selves," leading to transformation and social levelling, a view that reflects the optimism of Bakhtinian renewal or Turnerian *communitas*. Because the party brings all the novel's characters together, it is important to in turn consider its effects on both threads of the narrative.

The invitation to the Shellings' party sends Miss Padsoe and Miss Baker into a "pleasant fit of agitation," and they immediately decide to get new dresses for the event (211). As the narrator tells the reader, "[t]hey had had to have them," gesturing to the alluring pull of a new dress (214). Miss Baker uses her sewing skills to create the new garments herself: the evening gown in this period was not a form that readily translated to mass-production (Marshik 30), and getting a custom dress from a dressmaker was a costly expense. While Miss Baker uses patterns for the dresses, her expertise allows her to deviate from them successfully, meaning she can make bespoke dresses at a fraction of the cost of

having one professionally made. As Marshik notes, even the most straightforward evening dress styles were difficult for the working and middle classes to recreate, as cheaper patterns often lacked a good cut and fit (30). Indeed, Miss Baker is described as “sniff[ing] contemptuously” over the pattern, perhaps in recognition of its lower quality and consequent unsuitability for those with lesser skills than her (214). Miss Baker is only able to craft refined garments from a weak pattern because of her cutting skills. Advertisements in *Vogue* for the Paris Academy of Dressmaking also strongly emphasise the importance of cut. “To be well dressed,” an advertisement from 1931 states, “depends far more on the cut of the clothes than the beauty of the material or the elegance of design. Cut is the foundation of Chic” (figure 4.2). Importantly, Miss Baker’s deviations also grant the pair social distinction. As Gilles Lipovetsky argues, distinctive and elaborate designs or fabrics helped to indicate social excellence during the “democratization of fashion” in the early twentieth century (61). Another Paris Academy of Dressmaking advertisement points to the dual benefit of making garments yourself: this “specialised knowledge” means one will “save large sums” while also “being exclusively dressed” (“Learn” 106). The evening gown, while more accessible than before to those on lower incomes, was still a material indicator of prestige: a form of “objectified” cultural capital, to borrow from Bourdieu (50).



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Mme. J. TROIS FONTAINES, Principal
**PARIS ACADEMY OF
DRESSMAKING LTD.**
24 OLD BOND ST., W.1

Figure 4.2: Advertisement for the Paris Academy of Dressmaking, *Vogue*, 24 June 1931, p. 78.

The party and the sartorial activity it inspires, then, also become a transformation of sorts for Miss Baker, allowing creativity back into her life after the restrictions of her employment. Her previous career as a pattern-cutter is reliant on reproducing the designer's garments accurately and ensuring that each pattern is identical – consistent with her time spent in London living "as narrowly as a mouse in its hole" (3). While her job involved her fitting a mannequin with "a key-pattern for an evening dress" (55), it is only once she leaves the role that she can sew the garment into its material existence. Moreover, the dresses mark the first time that Miss Baker can deviate from a pattern – both the sartorial and the social.

She is pleasantly surprised by her abilities: while she is well practised in sewing, it has been “years” since she has “*made*” garments with such creative licence (214).

Miss Padsoe’s transformative moment comes when she looks at herself in the mirror for the first time in her new dress:

She saw a tall, very slender lady in a grey dress patterned with shadowy pink flowers. A head silver as honesty topped the grey dress, and blue earrings picked up the bright blue in her eyes. Miss Padsoe stared and stared. That’s me, she thought. I used to look at myself like this when I was twenty. (214–15)

Miss Padsoe is so happy with her appearance that she suddenly declares “I’m going to throw all my old clothes away to-morrow [...] and buy some stuff to make new ones,” asking Miss Baker to help her with the process (215). The shedding of an old wardrobe – a change in orientation – also sheds Miss Padsoe and The Tower’s old selves: in adapting more becoming clothes, Miss Padsoe’s youthful look aligns with her home’s re-energised appearance.

Like Miss Padsoe, Queenie realises she too needs a new dress for the Shellings’ party. But her position as a lady’s companion complicates this process. Companions occupied an awkward space in the household: they were neither a servant nor a member of the family, and while they tended to be of a higher class than servants, they were still financially dependent upon the family through payment for their services. While Bell has several dresses to select from and will wear her “lilac tulle,” Queenie only has her “old black” (205). Bell quickly resolves the issue by suggesting they go to London to buy a new frock and “go to May Mason and have our faces done” (205). While Queenie worries about the cost of visiting a beauty salon – May Mason is “terribly expensive” (205) – Bell offers to pay. Presumably named after its founder, May Mason is a gesture to the popular beauty salons of the time, such as Elizabeth Arden and Helena Rubinstein, where visitors could receive skin treatments, have makeup professionally applied, and purchase items to reproduce looks at

home. These salons were part of what Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska has described as the “duty-to-beauty discourse” that was particularly prominent during the interwar period, where the broader media depicted women’s beauty as being available to all (302). For instance, Rubinstein, in her advice guide *The Art of Feminine Beauty* (1930), championed the “great democratisation of beauty,” arguing that it had led to more women becoming “conscious and practical in the pursuit of good looks” (32). Self-improvement was a central theme in interwar discussions of beauty: Rubinstein claims paying attention to one’s beauty will only result in “the accentuation, the perfecting to its highest degree of what is truly individual” (34). Beauty is not “a perfect regularity of feature” but “rather grace and mobility of movement, loveliness in colouring and the harmonious interplay of mind and body” (35). Aligning with this discourse, beauty salons in their advertising promised to enhance what was already there: Elizabeth Arden’s mauve powder, for instance, serves to give “a final touch of exquisite delicacy” to the complexion in the evenings (“Complexions” 18). Visits to the salon were figured as productive and meaningful for the client: “[n]ot a minute of your time is wasted,” as “[e]very movement contributes definitely to your improvement” (“In Elizabeth Arden” 16). Elizabeth Arden also promised to get their clients through the entertaining season, proclaiming they should “wine, dine and be merry and let Elizabeth Arden keep you young and lovely” (“Wine” 22). In delegating the task of beautification to the salon, the client is left with more leisure time.

Gibbons glosses the actual trip to London in the narrative, but at the party, Queenie is the centre of attention. Gibbons writes that “[i]t was Queenie’s evening” and “several of the older women looked at her curiously and a little wistfully” (216). Her new frock—a “dark blue dress scattered with silver stars”—gives her a “radiant” look, and she is “charged with vitality” (216). This image of sophisticated and refined beauty is a stark contrast to how Queenie appears when she is first introduced in the narrative, wearing cheap and practical clothes defined entirely by their cost—a mackintosh of the “fifteen and elevenpenny kind”

and a hat of the “eight and elevenpenny kind,” leaving Miss Baker to assume Queenie must be poor (17). The act of wearing a new dress, then, is a social levelling; it erases the class differences between Queenie and George that are so evident at the beginning of the novel. For both Miss Padsoe and Queenie, clothing plays an instrumental role in their transformations: their evening gowns serve to enhance – rather than obscure or change – their original personalities. For Marshik, the evening gown in modernist and middlebrow fiction continually subjects its wearer to danger, “awkwardness” or “shame” (26). Plock conversely shows that women writers of the period did not always paint clothing and fashion in such a negative light (22). *Bassett*’s positioning of the evening gown finds more resonance with this latter reading, with the evening gown becoming an empowering object, one that endows confidence and happiness upon its wearer.

The ending breaks away from convention by denying the expected romantic happy ending, fitting with the novel’s interest in subverting patterns. As Humble argues, the shifting gender conventions brought on by the First World War led to “a radical reassessment of romance” in the generic conventions of the interwar middlebrow novel (*Feminine Middlebrow Novel* 198). Indeed, the novel’s close is bittersweet: the more eccentric – but platonic – pairing of Miss Baker and Miss Padsoe finds happiness, while the relationship between George and Queenie comes to a disastrous end. As Terri Mullholland observes, *Bassett* is one of the few novels to feature a landlady (rather than a boarder) as its heroine (67; see also Briganti and Mezei 119). The novel further bucks the trend in boarding house novels by presenting a positive outlook on landladies and spinsters, in a period filled with anxiety about these concepts. In one of Miss Padsoe’s final scenes, she has a “cheerful laugh,” one that “should have reproved the many people who contend that spinsters can never be happy,” a riposte to the prevailing attitudes of the time as well as confirmation that her new pattern is more suitable for her (267). At the novel’s end, The Tower has six boarders in residence and looks “most flourishing” (307). Even Miss Padsoe’s cousin

concedes after visiting Bassett that “the whole unfortunate situation” of the boarding house “has turned out not *quite* so badly as one might have expected” (307). The boarding house, Gibbons suggests, need not be feared as a site of moral and social degradation.

The latter third of the novel charts the gradual destruction of George and Queenie’s relationship. After a trip abroad, George returns to tell her that he has fallen out of love with her, admitting he does not “really *need* love” in his life (283). Queenie is dismissed by Mrs Shelling and sent back to London to live with her family. The failure of George and Queenie’s relationship can in part be attributed to events in Gibbons’s life: she had ended her first romantic relationship with Walter Beck in the late 1920s after realising he would never commit (Oliver, *Out* 68). As Oliver notes, Gibbons openly acknowledged that Beck and his mother and sister were close models for the Shelling family (43). There are also traces of Gibbons in the character of Queenie: Queenie is “the daughter of a dentist in Islington” (51); Gibbons was the daughter of a doctor in nearby Kentish Town. Queenie’s narrative may have been a chance for Gibbons to rewrite her own.

While George’s decision denies the reader a conventional happy ending, the narrative’s conclusion is still tinged with optimism about Queenie’s future: Gibbons shows there are alternative paths to happiness. After Queenie’s departure, Mrs Shelling receives a phone call from Bertie Barranger, a friend of the Shellings who attended the party, asking if Queenie would be interested in attending the Proms in London. As “an old-fashioned person,” Mrs Shelling “could not give the address of a young girl to a young man without a feeling of satisfaction,” hinting at the potential of a new romance (293). Moreover, Gibbons’s descriptions of the London landscape in the novel’s final pages move from the ugly to the beautiful as Queenie readjusts to being back in the city. While London looks “filthy, hideous, hopeless” when Queenie first returns, evoking sadness and gloom, it is not long until the city’s beauty restores itself (294). As Hammill notes, Gibbons’s suburban novels place heavy emphasis on the natural landscape of North London, while frequently lamenting the

expansion of the city ("Stella Gibbons" 76). Initially, Queenie rejects the London landscape through physical action: she sweeps out her room because it "smell[s] of stale sunlight and dust" and blocks out the world by drawing "the curtains against the afternoon sun" (295–96). But when Queenie's mother returns home and the heat of the day begins to subside, the natural world takes on renewed meaning for Queenie:

She went over to the window and pulled the curtains back. The royal light rushed in, gold, triumphant; the pigeons went up in a fluttering cloud.

"There's a breeze now... lovely."

They went downstairs together, and as they reached the landing Queenie said steadily, "I'm glad to be home." (299)

The pulling back of the curtains releases nature back into the room, the sunshine becomes a source of beauty, and in turn, for the first time since arriving back in London, Queenie finds a source of happiness. In doing so, Queenie returns to the pattern her own parents follow, resolving to find work that is "not just running away from ugliness or work to earn money" but work that helps others who are less fortunate (298).

Bassett chronicles the everyday disappointments faced by women due to the shifting situations surrounding class, wealth, and work in the interwar years, proffering an optimistic outlook on these concerns. The novel's central party displays how enhancing one's appearance — via a new evening dress or a trip to the beauty salon — can have transformative effects, effects that last long beyond the party's conclusion. But like Elfine in *Cold Comfort Farm*, Miss Padsoe and Queenie are able to maintain their personalities. Parties in *Bassett* show how women can deviate from social and sartorial patterns via transformation, displaying the middlebrow's aspirational qualities.

Nightingale Wood in the Pages of Good Housekeeping

The cover line on the June 1937 issue of British *Good Housekeeping* declares its readers will find a “New Novel by Stella Gibbons” inside—a work the magazine describes as “[t]he most striking work of a highly individual writer” (“Nightingale Wood” 7). The novel is *Nightingale Wood*, Gibbons’s fifth novel and her first serialised in a periodical. *Nightingale Wood*’s serialisation, I argue, is vital to a reading of the novel’s parties as transformational and aspirational events. *Nightingale Wood* depicts a pragmatic and frugal approach to preparing for a party, showing its reader that it is possible to achieve distinction on a budget. While *Cold Comfort Farm* displays the transformative power of texts, illuminating their capacity to guide readers, *Nightingale Wood* itself becomes an instructive text through its serialisation in a high-circulation middlebrow magazine. The central character’s transformation and fairytale ending would have appealed to and been aspirational for *Good Housekeeping*’s middle-class audience.

The novel—which Oliver describes as being a “wittily ironic version of *Cinderella*” (*Out* 147)—focuses on the recently widowed Viola Wither, who has come to live with her late husband’s upper-middle-class family in Essex. A shop girl who married for security rather than love, Viola is forced to rely on the company of her in-laws, Mr and Mrs Wither, and her two unmarried older sisters-in-law—Tina, who is obsessed with dieting and harbours affection for the family chauffeur, and Madge, who is fond of sports and wants nothing more than a dog. Near the Wither residence is the home of the wealthy Spring family, including Victor Spring, the local area’s Prince Charming. Negotiating issues surrounding work, class, gender, and love, the novel charts the interactions between all of these characters, but the central love story that gives it its Cinderella qualities is between Viola and Victor.

Launched in Britain in 1922 and costing a shilling an issue, *Good Housekeeping* appealed to a feminine, middle-class audience. It was a reasonably popular periodical, with a reported circulation of 99,400 in 1938 (White n.p., facing 324). Typically, the first half of each issue featured several fiction items and a number of “special articles” that were usually commentaries on issues relevant to contemporary life. The latter half’s focus was on the domestic, with articles on furniture and décor, fashion, health and beauty, household appliances, and cooking. The tone of the periodical was decidedly instructive, with article titles such as “A Lesson in the Art of Waiting at Table,” “At the Season of Dinner Parties, the Dining-Table Must Look At Its Best,” and “Seasonable Hospitality: Suggestions for Entertaining Children and Grown-Ups.”⁴ This was aided by the establishment of the “*Good Housekeeping Institute*” in 1924, which was an integral part of the magazine and coached its readers on which products were worth buying via the “Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval” (Wood, “Made” 15). While the periodical’s advertising certainly targeted the middle-class housewife, its articles addressed both married and unmarried women (15). For Wood, *Good Housekeeping* is an “aspirational” publication (“Housekeeping” 212), and the magazine’s fiction section confirms its interest in how self-improvement could realise aspiration. As a romantic comedy, *Nightingale Wood* was the ideal sort of fiction to include in *Good Housekeeping*. It offered a plot that explored many contemporary anxieties, but still resolved in a satisfying ending where there is a direct causal link between the improvements the characters make and their ultimate happiness.

Before *Nightingale Wood*’s serialisation, Gibbons had published short stories in *Good Housekeeping*, and she continued to do so afterwards, suggesting a strong working relationship between Gibbons and the magazine (Oliver, “Re: Stella Gibbons”). By 1937, Gibbons was a well-known writer in the literary landscape, and her work generally sold

⁴ See: Mack; Garbutt; Creswell.

well and was well received, although subsequent novels never reached *Cold Comfort Farm*'s levels of critical acclaim. Gibbons's publishing contracts indicate her increased value in the literary marketplace. The contract between Gibbons and her publisher for the publication of *Cold Comfort Farm* shows she received an advance of thirty pounds.⁵ By 1936, she was able to command a much larger advance: for *The Roaring Tower* (1937), she received one hundred pounds,⁶ and for the American publication of *Nightingale Wood*, she received four hundred dollars.⁷ According to the 1938 *Authors Playwrights and Composers Handbook*, *Good Housekeeping* paid a minimum of fifteen guineas per short story and anywhere from two hundred to three thousand pounds for serials (Roberts 107); given Gibbons's gravitas, it is reasonable to suggest she attracted more than the minimum sum for her work. The handbook also notes short stories pitched to *Good Housekeeping* "must be extremely well written," and serials must be "first-class work" (Roberts 107). As a result, *Good Housekeeping* regularly featured high-calibre and well-known writers: other contributors during the period of *Nightingale Wood*'s serialisation included Storm Jameson, Beverley Nichols, Hugh Walpole, Alec Waugh, and Dorothy Whipple.

Like Bassett, reviews of *Nightingale Wood* pointed to Gibbons's strength in developing authentic characters. "Her people are real people," one reviewer wrote, "[a]nd by being real they are interesting" ("Among" 3). The realness of Gibbons's characters is central to the

⁵ Agreement between Stella Gibbons and Longmans for *Cold Comfort Farm*. 20 Apr. 1932, University of Reading, Reading, Records of the Longman Group MS 1393 2/243/1857.

⁶ Agreement between Stella Gibbons and Longmans for *The Roaring Tower*. 13 Nov. 1936, University of Reading, Reading, Records of the Longman Group MS 1393 2/243/2422.

⁷ Memorandum of agreement between Stella Gibbons and Longmans for *Nightingale Wood*. 17 Feb. 1936, Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, Columbia University, New York, Watkins Loomis Records MS 1309, Series V, Box 147.

novel's middlebrow appeal: the experiences of everyday characters seem more attainable to the aspirational reader. As Fiona Hackney notes, interwar women's magazines combined "rational (editorial) and emotional (fiction) appeals," providing "a perfect environment for a new language of communication that combined authoritative information with fantasy and escape" (301). Moreover, women who engaged with these magazines during the interwar years were "attentive and reflective" and brought their "lived experience to the act of reading" (300). Readers of *Good Housekeeping* during *Nightingale Wood*'s serialisation would have related their life events to what was happening to the characters in each instalment.

Nightingale Wood again approves a practical and level-headed approach to navigating social situations. If, as Wood notes, "[t]he rhetoric of efficiency was pervasive in interwar women's magazines" ("Housekeeping" 213), *Nightingale Wood*, in its serialised form, endorsed this rhetoric. Aligning with the Cinderella narrative, the novel's central party is a ball that brings Viola and Victor together. Viola's transformation, through the purchase of a new outfit and haircut, leads to romantic success at the ball, but she achieves this via highly practical and frugal means. Distinction, Gibbons suggests, is not something exclusive to those with larger incomes. The pragmatism within the story reflects the magazine's remit: Oliver surmises that "the rather staid practical title of *Good Housekeeping* would have appealed" to Gibbons ("Re: Stella Gibbons"). She had a tumultuous upbringing thanks to an alcoholic father renowned for infidelity and was left to support her two brothers following her mother's death. As a result, Gibbons "had something of an obsession with ordered domestic tranquillity" ("Re: Stella Gibbons"). The neatly resolved plot of *Nightingale Wood*, much like most other fiction published in *Good Housekeeping*, subscribes to this desire for order. This ordering impulse, as the previous chapter has shown, was shared by Waugh: but while Waugh's novels end in desolation and decay to advance their critique, Gibbons's tidy plots embody her value for organisation.

Left with only ninety pounds after her husband's death, Viola gives up her London flat and comes to live with the Wither family at their home, The Eagles. Her return triggers her long-held attraction to Victor, the most desirable man in Chesterbourne, whom she daydreams about marrying. But the narrative immediately establishes her as only one of many girls in the area with this desire:

All the girls who had grown up in Chesterbourne – the girls in Woolworth's and the young ladies in Barclay's Bank, the assistants in the two smart hairdressing shops and the tradesmen's daughters, the shopgirls and the typists and secretaries, the young receptionist at the Miraflor Café and the waitresses therein – they all daydreamed just a little, when they retired to the back of their own minds for a reverie about a wedding, of marrying Victor Spring. (27)

Viola – as a shop girl – is emblematic of all of Chesterbourne's everyday working girls: her experiences and fantasies are also theirs. This conflation between Viola and the everyday girl extends beyond the novel, calling upon its reader. The reader of *Good Housekeeping*, particularly the unmarried or working woman, becomes another person who daydreams about upward social mobility. The positioning of Viola as representative of many is continually reinforced throughout the novel and is key to the novel's aspirational tone. For the working women, Victor symbolises a life beyond the labours of their service roles; one where leisure, rather than work, dominates. To them, he lives "in a wonderful world where everyone was happy, and wore lovely clothes, and went to dances and shows every night and enjoyed everything" (28). Yet, they all still "grew up prepared to marry the publican, the tailor and the chemist as their mothers had done before them" (27), suggesting they do not find their own lives unsatisfying. Such a statement grounds the novel in everyday reality and emphasises the value of such industries and roles, while maintaining its aspirational tone.

Nightingale Wood's interest in everyday reality is furthered through its explicit representation of frugal practices. Frugality is a recurrent theme throughout 1930s issues of *Good Housekeeping*. For instance, a seven-part series by American advice manual writer Marjorie Hillis titled "Orchids on Your Budget" ran during *Nightingale Wood*'s serialisation. The articles are a guide on how to live within your means while still enjoying life, providing advice on savvy spending in relation to topics such as day-to-day meals, entertaining, maintaining your lifestyle in old age, and making do in times of precarity. The January 1938 instalment focuses on food, suggesting if one's budget becomes tight, they should emphasise simple dishes and attractive presentation: "there is such a vogue for simple, yet interesting, food to-day that corned-beef hash and cold cabbage, served with chic, can seem like something copied from the smartest house or magazine" ("Orchids" 40). Other columns also contained practical advice about managing on a limited budget. "The Housekeeper's Dictionary of Facts" compiled titbits of advice and responded to readers' queries about household issues. The July 1932 column suggests making a homemade floor polisher out of an old broom, cloth, and velvet, and offers ways to reduce food waste, such as making "turnip and celery tops" into "a wholesome and palatable" salad ("Housekeeper's Dictionary" 78). The "Patterns of the Month" column, meanwhile, highlighted the newest and most fashionable patterns for crafting clothes. *Nightingale Wood*'s emphasis on practicality aligns with the more general discourse that *Good Housekeeping* magazine promoted in the interwar years.

The biggest and most significant event on Chesterbourne's social calendar is the annual Infirmary Ball, a charity ball held by Lord and Lady Dovewood. While Viola wishes for nothing more than to go the ball because she is "simply *crazy*" about dancing, she is not sure if Mr Wither will buy her a ticket (117). When he confirms that she will be attending, Viola is thrilled by the prospect, because of the potential for romance with Victor:

She was going to the Ball! and *He* would be there! She would wear her silver dancing shoes again and have her hair waved, and get some new pearl ear-rings from Woolworths (no one would know they came from Woolworth's. Of course, you always knew when other people's ear-rings came from Woolworth's but they never guessed about yours). Perhaps he would dance with her; a waltz, slow and dreamy, or quick and exciting. (123)

Viola's fantasies are aspirational, but they also contain an element of pragmatism. She recognises that she can only afford new earrings from Woolworths, but this is permissible because "no one would know they came from" there in the first place.⁸ As Humble notes, the Woolworths store was booming in this period, attracting both the working and middle classes with its cheap and cheerful products (*Feminine Middlebrow Novel* 131). Others make similar thrifty preparations: "hairdressers in Chesterbourne were busy, a good many bottles of coloured nail varnish were sold at Woolworth's, and Thompson and Burgess sold a large number of their fine-gauge silk stockings" (135). Again, Viola is positioned as just one of many engaging in frugal practices in anticipation of heightened – but still realistic – pleasure.

Viola's "delightful fancies" are briefly dashed when she spots her "two limp and faded evening-frocks" and her "silver slippers," which are "tarnished, stubbed at the toes, [with] a button missing" (126). However, instead of falling into an extended period of despair, Viola is not at all fazed "because she knew that she would be able to buy a pretty, fashionable and comfortable pair [of shoes] for less than a pound" (126). One can look refined and glamorous, the narrator suggests, without necessarily having to spend a

⁸ Or, perhaps there is a conscious decision to not discuss the origins of earrings at all: that is, everyone can tell when other people's earrings come from Woolworths, but because *their* earrings are also from Woolworths, they choose to remain silent.

significant amount of money. Gibbons again invokes ideas of civilised appearance and behaviour: while “[c]ivilization as we know it is corrupt,” it still finds ways to “supply its young daughters with luxuries at prices they can afford,” so “[n]o woman need be dowdy, or shabbily genteel” (127).⁹ As long as one “has a few shillings to spend on clothes,” it is possible to buy “something pretty and cheerful” (127). In Gibbons’s view, as long as you have the right approaches and methods, it is possible to look stylish even if finances are tight.

Viola’s entire transformation is highly frugal. In order to achieve her new look, Viola goes up to London to spend the day with Shirley, an old friend and the novel’s fairy godmother. Like *Cold Comfort Farm*, texts again serve as inspiration for a transformation in appearance. Viola’s late father, a Shakespeare enthusiast, named his daughter after *Twelfth Night*’s central character. Remembering her late father’s “tattered old volume” of Shakespeare’s plays on the train to London, Viola fixates upon the illustration of *Twelfth Night*’s Viola dressed as Cesario, with “her hair cut short like a boy’s and curling prettily all over her head” (131), and decides to get her hair cut in the same style. For Viola, “those [...] gallant curls” signal “all romance for her, all adventure, and escape” (131). Indeed, as the narrator notes, “the whole pattern of her life was changed that day,” simply by remembering the illustration (132). As Ahmed argues, the act of “[b]ringing objects near to bodies [...] involves acts of perception about ‘what’ can be brought near” (*Queer Phenomenology* 55). Like Elfine in *Cold Comfort Farm*, transformative action (getting a haircut)

⁹ Gibbons’s claim here that civilisation is corrupt echoes Waugh’s sentiments about the decline of civilised society. Compared to Waugh, though, Gibbons places more emphasis on the positive effects modernity can have upon civilisation: because fashionable items like Viola’s shoes are affordably priced, more people are able to access them, leading to a greater overall level of civilised appearance.

makes things previously unavailable to Viola reachable. The trendy permed crop hairstyle makes Viola look “fashionable as well as startlingly distinguished” (142) and changes her sense of self: “[s]he laughed more often, she seemed more *self-confident*” (141). As John and Mary Davidson comment in the advice manual *Etiquette at a Dance: What to Do and What Not to Do* (1937), “[t]he coiffure is of the utmost importance” for attendance at a ball, and “a visit to the hairdresser [...] is a well-justified expense” (32). A new hairstyle endows both self-confidence and distinction upon its wearer.

Viola’s dress is obtained for a reasonable price, after being “reduced in successive sales and sold at last to Shirley by a friend [...], and Shirley had sold it to Viola” (148). A pale blue chiffon number with a “dark-red sash,” Tina recognises the dress as being made by “Rose-Berthe,” an expensive designer brand (148). The dress, a marker of economic, social, and cultural capital, combined with the new haircut, allows Viola to capture the attention of everyone in the room at the ball: “[e]veryone was staring at her; lots of people had waved and said, ‘Hullo, Vi! I didn’t recognize you. I like your hair!’” (148). Viola’s transformation, then, lends her the social splendour she desires, but she achieves it in clever and practical ways: a striking haircut, a designer dress on sale, a pair of silver shoes costing a pound, and a pair of earrings from Woolworths.

But Viola’s (and the other Chesterbourne women’s) careful and extensive preparations for the ball contrast with those of Phyllis Barlow, Victor’s love interest and date for the evening. With a similar level of social and economic capital to Victor, she wears “a dress she had worn several times, which was not one of her favourites,” as there is “no point in wasting a good dress on these people” (143). Even the event’s hosts, the Dovewoods, fail to meet Phyllis’s standards: they are “frumps” with “not much money” (143). As Oliver argues, *Nightingale Wood* explores the implications of being “an individual” or “a type,” someone who conforms “to a particular social pattern” (*Out* 150), a theme already seen in *Bassett*. Viola, with her new dress and haircut, is an individual; conversely, Phyllis – with her

repeated dress, snobbish opinions, and her interest in “[t]he steady pursuit of conventional pleasures” —is entirely a type (*Nightingale Wood* 69). While Gibbons does not propose that being an individual is always a positive thing,¹⁰ she does suggest individuality has “moral implications” as “real virtue” can only be achieved by the individual (*Oliver, Out* 150). The Davidsons’ advice manual endorses the importance of individuality, especially at a dance: “[t]he style of the frock [...] is usually more effective when it expresses the individuality of the wearer” (*Etiquette* 30). They continue that it is vitally important to consider the whole “ensemble” rather than focusing on just the evening gown (30). A “comparatively cheap garment” with “all the etceteras [...] in harmony” will look much more refined than “a more expensive frock” paired with “an incongruous pair of shoes” (31). When Phyllis sees Viola at the ball, she reluctantly concludes that Viola is “stareworthy” and has “distinction,” commenting that her dress is “*very good*,” and “the hair was good too” (152). Miller has shown how clothes, as material objects, determine the self: what we wear turns us “into what we think we are” (D. Miller, *Stuff* 13). This stance chimes with Goffman, who asserts that appearance is central in how individuals present themselves to others (34). By wearing a dress that is refined and distinctive, Viola herself becomes refined and distinctive. While Viola’s ensemble is nowhere near as expensive as Phyllis’s, it still grants her sophistication because Viola has carefully considered how every aspect of the outfit fits together.

Garments, as in *Bassett*, display their transformative potential. The Davidsons observe that clothing very much sets the tone as to whether one will enjoy the evening: if “a woman feels that she looks well in her clothes and that they compare favourably with

¹⁰ As demonstrated in my analysis of *Cold Comfort Farm*, Gibbons’s ideal individual is always mediated by society and convention. Being a civilised individual involves maintaining one’s personality whilst conforming to dominant codes and expectations; uncivilised or eccentric individuals fail to comply with such systems of knowledge.

others, she settles down to the business of enjoyment" (*Etiquette* 29). But if "her garments are not right, then there is little hope of her having a successful evening" (29). Because Viola's garments compare favourably to those of Phyllis, she has a successful evening: Victor rewards Viola's efforts to appear stylish and desirable by asking her for a dance. When Victor writes his name in Viola's dancing programme, her original fantasy comes true because he selects the first dance after supper, which happens to be a waltz:

Round and round they swung, Viola's flying sandals obediently following his lead the fraction of an instant after it. She had no will, no thoughts, she knew no past and no future, going with him as lightly as a flower, her sash fluttering out and the pleats of her frock flying, her eyes half-shut and her lips parted in a little smile of happiness. (159)

Here, the reference to Viola's shoes and the details of her dress points to their importance in getting Victor to notice her. Viola and Victor are unable, however, to continue dancing: once the song ends, "like the stroke of twelve in the bemused ears of Cinderella, there sounded in her ear the voice of Mrs Wither" (160). The final image Gibbons supplies of Viola's evening is her at home "dreaming, with her face covered with a cream at sixpence a tube and a dance programme under her pillow" (170). Now the fantasy of dancing with Victor has been realised, Viola's aspiration to one day marry Victor seems more attainable. While Viola can only afford moisturiser that is sixpence a tube—drastically cheaper than Tina's at "two and sixpence" and Phyllis's at "six and sixpence a pot" (170, 164)—her experiences prove money and class are not the sole determiners of romantic potential and wish-fulfilment at integrative festive occasions like the Infirmary Ball. In naming their prices, Gibbons explicitly labels these tubes and pots of face cream as commodified material objects. But while Arjun Appadurai suggests the value of a commodity is determined at the point of its economic exchange (3), Gibbons, in bringing the three, differently priced varieties together, suggests they hold equal value, levelling out the social differences of the three women. An

article from a 1935 issue of *Good Housekeeping* enacts a similar rhetoric, proclaiming that the answer to “the price of beauty” is “a multiple one” (Cox 152). The article provides sample beauty budgets for different women, such as a typist in a rural town earning twenty-five shillings a week, a London secretary earning four pounds a week, and an actress on five thousand a year. Like *Nightingale Wood*, the article emphasises staying within one’s means but also suggests distinction in appearance is not a money-determined matter.

Much like the original Cinderella, *Nightingale Wood* ends with the wedding between Viola and Victor. Again, the narrator turns to Viola’s position as one of many girls in the area:

This wedding is not just the marriage of one Chesterbourne girl to Victor Spring.

Viola is the type of all those girls in shops and offices, banks and cafes, Woolworths and Boots and Marks and Spencers, who have all dreamed, just a little, about a wedding with Victor Spring. (382)

Gibbons connects her heroine to the everyday working woman both inside and outside the text, reiterating the anti-elitist stance of *Cold Comfort Farm*’s foreword. By approaching modern sociability and festivity with a level head, Gibbons suggests, the readers of *Good Housekeeping* and *Nightingale Wood* can also aspire to such happy endings of their own.

In her interwar novels, Gibbons highlights the transformative potential of parties, seeing them as events imbued with promise and positivity – as long as they are approached in the correct way. Her novels exhibit a distinctive middlebrow quality that creates a version of the party consciousness that emphasises rational, sensible, and frugal behaviour over emotional and financial excess. Such a move, this chapter has contended, creates an intimate connection between author, reader, and text, where Gibbons actively caters to the aspirational desires of her audience in her novels’ content. Gibbons’s novels are part of a larger print ecology, and their rhetoric of practical aspiration is echoed in the period’s middlebrow magazines.

As she wrote in *Cold Comfort Farm*, Gibbons's envisaged audience is comprised of those "in the vulgar and meaningless bustle of offices, shops and homes" (6). By placing everyday women as heroines who find social or romantic fulfilment after a transformation for a party, Gibbons allows her readers to aspire towards upward social mobility. Texts, clothing, and appearance primarily steer these transformations. In *Cold Comfort Farm*, texts provide a guiding path for Elfine and Ada's transformations, championing a common-sense approach to approaching modern sociability and festivity. In *Bassett*, acquiring a new evening gown not only enhances one's original personality and features but also has effects long beyond the night of the party, allowing its wearer to break out of the personal and social expectations ascribed to them. In *Nightingale Wood*, Viola's makeover for the ball and subsequent fairytale marriage demonstrate that one does not need money to achieve distinction and happiness, a message that would have empowered those reading the novel during its serialisation in *Good Housekeeping* — a magazine with an explicitly aspirational tone. Above all, all three novels in their depictions of parties display Gibbons's characteristic reasoned and practical approach to navigating life, a common sensibility in interwar feminine middlebrow writing. Like Gibbons, Mitford too was interested in the intersection between class and festive forms. While Gibbons looks forward to the future, extolling the possibilities the party brings for social mobility, Mitford looks back to the past, interrogating the traditions of aristocratic festive occasions.

Chapter 5

Restorative Nostalgia, Bathos, and Nancy Mitford's Parties

In a 2018 *Tatler* article, Matthew Bell proposes a series of “new-U rules” for being “upper class.” The article’s inspiration is Nancy Mitford’s controversial 1955 *Encounter* essay “The English Aristocracy,” which argued that language was central to class distinction and popularised Alan S. C. Ross’s theory of “U” and “non-U” language. According to Bell, class distinction in the twenty-first century is no longer just about language, but “taste, [...] style, and culture.” So “to put your mind at ease, or send you into further paroxysms,” the article intimates, “we set out the new rules for being new-U in 2019.” Being “new-U” includes “[h]aving a job,” “[t]urning at a dinner party,” and “EasyJet”; non-U incorporates “[d]ietary requirements,” “[e]laborate gin and tonics,” and “Jacob Rees-Mogg.” *Tatler* is perhaps the most well-known British high society magazine of both Mitford’s time and ours (the magazine’s online tagline is “the original social media”), seen as the ultimate guide to sophisticated society, for both those within it and those anxious to be part of it. It is unsurprising then that the article led to a flurry of subsequent pieces by other media organisations, including *Cosmopolitan*, the *Daily Mail*, *Metro*, the *Sun*, and *Vice*, reacting with a mix of amusement and astonishment at *Tatler*’s audacity.¹

That the ideas in Mitford’s original essay can still provoke the public sixty years after their publication points to their continued contemporaneity. “The English Aristocracy” is, of course, resolutely tongue-in-cheek. But in its appropriation of Ross’s ideas, the essay cuts straight to the core of anxieties about class and status, with the potential to leave its readers exposed and vulnerable. Ross’s theory pronounces specific ways of speaking and writing as U (shorthand for the upper class) and others as non-U (shorthand for the middle and working classes). For instance, “table-napkin” is U, while “serviette” is non-U (27).

¹ See: Baxter-Wright; Cliff; Haynes; Pemberton; E. Scott.

While Ross claims to be using U and non-U “factually and not in reprobation” (9), these binary terms and the highly charged language Ross uses to explain them show explicit value judgement. For Ross, U is “*correct, proper, legitimate, appropriate*” while non-U is “*incorrect, not proper, not legitimate*” (9). U is the privileged form; non-U is not. Ross’s theory policies and reinforces the boundaries between U and non-U, reinforcing U as the form that legitimates power.

While “The English Aristocracy,” according to Selina Hastings, was intended as a joke, it was nonetheless “a joke which Nancy herself more than half took seriously” (224). While she was not snobbish, Mitford perceived herself (and her peers) as “special and apart,” separate from “the public” (224). Mitford’s essay asserts that even though the English aristocracy is “on the verge of decadence,” it is still “the only real aristocracy left in the world today” (35). While peers and the upper middle class share many qualities, there is a “very definite borderline” between the upper middle class and the middle class (37), evidenced through U and non-U language (to which Mitford adds some more examples). The peerage “share an aristocratic attitude to life”: in times of crisis, they will sooner sell off their belongings and estates than turn to employment (43). While Mitford endorses the aristocracy’s dogged determination to survive, she laments the expenses associated with the process. The modern nobleman no longer “builds ornamental bridges, or digs lakes, or adds wings” to his country estate, and all that their ancestors “so carefully amassed is [...] so carelessly scattered” (53–54). With the aristocratic home in tatters, hierarchies of class must be asserted through other means, such as language. Unlike Gibbons, then, Mitford is not working towards a democratic project of social mobility. At the same time, though, her incisive awareness of her privilege tempers her political commitment to the aristocracy. As her interwar novels demonstrate, Mitford is often deeply critical of the methods employed by her class to assert social hierarchy.

Mitford's novels reveal another approach towards the maintenance of the aristocracy: specialty parties, such as the Highland shooting party, Christmas, and the pageant. For Mitford's characters, the party consciousness is also a type of class consciousness. But Mitford presents these festive forms as "invented traditions," practices which "attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historical past" (Hobsbawm, "Inventing Traditions" 1). In *Highland Fling* (1931), *Christmas Pudding* (1932), and *Wigs on the Green* (1935), Mitford brings to the fore the highly constructed nature of specialised parties, showing they cannot adequately sustain aristocratic distinction. Matters of taste and style, these novels prove, are no longer indicators of superior social status. While scholars, readers, and even Mitford's biographers tend to dismiss these early novels because they lack the sharpness in language and plot of *The Pursuit of Love* (1945) and *Love in a Cold Climate* (1949),² these texts reveal interwar discourses surrounding specialty festivities. Mitford shows that these sorts of festivities fail to bring any celebratory transgression or pleasure: as the narrator of *Christmas Pudding* puts it, there is "neither the cheering strains of Terpsichore nor the sustaining draught of Bacchus" (183).

Mitford's aristocratic characters continually embody what Boym describes as "restorative nostalgia": a strain of nostalgia that emphasises a collective "past and future" (241). Restorative nostalgics do not see themselves as nostalgic, instead understanding their affect as "truth," hoping to restore the past in their present wholly (234). As such, invented traditions are closely associated with this form of nostalgia, building upon a rhetoric of continuity and tradition to offer "a comforting collective script for individual longing" (234). However, Mitford resolutely refuses any sympathy for such nostalgia, openly presenting

² For Hastings, Mitford's early novels are "bright, brittle, [and] essentially ephemeral" (129), while Laura Thompson expresses surprise that *Highland Fling* was even published, because "it really isn't very good" (88).

each festive tradition as an invented sham. This occurs primarily through bathos, a concept that finds its roots in Alexander Pope's 1727 essay "The Art of Sinking in Poetry." Written under the pseudonym Martinus Scriblerus, Pope's treatise counters Longinus's *On the Sublime*, satirising those who in their overwrought attempts at pathos end up at bathos instead, which he characterises as "the Bottom, the End, the Central Point, the *non plus ultra* of true Modern Poesie!" (171). In Pope's original conceptualisation of bathos, it is always an accident on the part of the artist, a blind faith in their capabilities to reach sublimity in their craft. But as Crangle and Peter Nicholls suggest, bathos in the light of twentieth-century modernity came to be deployed in a self-conscious, deliberate way: an intentionality that can serve to explicitly critique "a culture's ideological imperatives" ("On Bathos" 5). If bathos is, as Keston Sutherland writes, the "production of stupidity for public view" (22), Mitford's deliberate bathos serves to expose and shame the aristocracy's nostalgic and rigid engagement with invented traditions. While bathos is indeed evident in the form of these novels, it also appears in the machinations of content and plot. All feature a journey from the city to the country, a destination continually figured as disappointing, unsatisfying, and bathetic. This reading aligns with more recent theorisations of bathos, which point to its potential reach beyond just poetry and diction. For Sutherland, bathos is not created out of "the agency or decay of language itself [...]" but by the satirist who first attackingly discovers to public view the ridiculous destitution of truth in that language" (22), pointing to the centrality of exposure to bathos's eventual realisation. Miller also suggests bathos "results from intricate, multi-faceted interactions between figural language and the broader social contexts in which texts [...] are deployed" (T. Miller, "Strings" 49). Any account of Mitford's bathos, then, needs to be grounded in a historicised account of the aristocracy and the speciality festivities of the interwar period.

A regular observer of and participant in festivity, Mitford offers a critical insight into the way parties were structured and understood from an aristocratic perspective.³ The invented traditions in her novels serve to reinforce the structures that maintain the aristocracy, such as Englishness, nationalism, and the country estate. In their inventedness, Mitford's parties become sites for restorative nostalgia, events that seek to reinstate the past in the present. But Mitford's deployment of bathos lays these attempts bare, suggesting the aristocracy is headed not for resurgence but further decline if it continues to cling to invented traditions.

Going North: *Highland Fling*

Mitford boldly asserts in "The English Aristocracy" that the terms "Britain" and "Scottish" are non-U, while "England" and "Scotch" are U (39). "I have a game I play with all printers," she writes, "I write Scotch, it appears in the proofs as Scottish. I correct it back to Scotch. About once in three times I get away with it" (39). Writing to Waugh on the topic in late 1955, she asks "[w]hen did that vile Scottish begin?", recalling that the publishers of *Highland Fling* had changed all instances of "Scotch" in the novel to "Scottish" (Mitford and Waugh 380). Waugh's reply was cautious, advising that she "really must look up the history of these terms," a gesture towards their loaded meanings (380). However, Mitford refused to budge: "I don't care what you say [...] they are non-U" (381). This exchange took place as Mitford was revising the essay for republication in the essay collection *Noblesse Oblige*: in the original *Encounter* piece, there is no reference to Britain versus England or Scottish versus Scotch. For Mitford to then include these as additional examples, against Waugh's advice,

³ Mitford appeared regularly in the pages of society magazines during the 1920s and early 1930s, with *Tatler* describing her as "in much demand for every sort of party" and praising her for possessing "the great [...] virtue of never seeming bored" ("Letters" 528).

points to her steadfastness about the correct (that is, aristocratic) usage of these phrases. In clinging to the “U” terms, Mitford draws lines that affirm national identity much in the same way as invented traditions do: as Hobsbawm suggests, invented traditions establish “social cohesion or the membership of [...] real or artificial communities” (“Inventing Traditions” 9). Mitford asserts her aristocratic status, endorsing England as coloniser and Scotland as the colonised, privileging a version of Britishness that favours Englishness.

Scotland’s status as an imperial outpost from the metropole is at the core of *Highland Fling*, which focuses on a form of sociability reserved for the upper class: the country shooting party. The novel centres around four Bright Young People: Walter and Sally Monteath, a young couple with little money and even less sense; Jane Dacre, Sally’s best friend; and Albert Memorial Gates, an effeminate experimental artist with a passion for Victoriana. The quartet find themselves in the Scottish Highlands after Walter and Sally are invited to host a shooting party at a relative’s estate. At Dalloch Castle, they meet an array of older and eccentric peers, whose views jar uncomfortably against their own. While each group engages with the shooting party differently, they both read the festive form as emblematic of tradition—a tradition that enables the maintenance of their social superiority. However, the surrounding scenery, while essential to the characters’ conceptions of the Highlands, is not enough to make their journey worthwhile: throughout their stay, the Bright Young People experience numerous unpleasurable feelings, such as being cold, disappointed, hungry, or bored. While Mitford is herself complicit with aristocratic attitudes (as “The English Aristocracy” demonstrates), she uses this position to critique her own status; in satirising the English imposition upon Scotland, she satirises herself. As Mitford’s bathetic depiction of the Highland shooting party shows, invented traditions and restorative nostalgia cannot adequately uphold class structures.

Scholars frequently argue that Highlandism in its modern form is an invented tradition (Devine 86; Trevor-Roper 15). Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century legislation

responding to the growth of Jacobitism diminished Highland identity, while the Highland Clearances of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries led to mass evictions (Devine 86). At the same time, however, came a gradual popularisation of Highland culture, with Scottish military regiments adopting Highland dress, and the Romantic movement reimagining the rugged northern landscape as a site of marvel and beauty (87, 96–97). While Scotland was primarily an industrialised society based in the Lowlands at this point, its “main emblems of cultural identity” were from the Highlands (84). By the mid to late nineteenth century, the Highlands became a “vast outdoor playground” for the English upper classes, bolstered by Prince Albert’s purchase of the Balmoral Estate in 1852 for Queen Victoria (Wightman et al. 54).

Colloquially referred to as “going north,” the shooting party is a peculiar form of festivity because it is, in a sense, a series of parties within a larger party: it refers to both the extended period spent by guests at an estate, and the individual days spent out on the Yorkshire or Scottish Highland moors.⁴ First popularised by the Victorians, shooting reached its peak during the Edwardian period, but began to decline during the war as train access became difficult and motoring for leisure was discouraged (Durie 432, 441). Following the First World War, many Scottish shooting estates were sold, and there was a general reduction in the number of birds shot and the associated costs of entertaining guests at the estate (442). The shooting party and its aristocratic associations were actively under threat in the interwar years. In its origins, the shooting season is conceived entirely in relation to the aristocracy: its first day, 12 August (known as the “Glorious Twelfth”), officially marks the end of the London society season. However, as Alastair J. Durie points

⁴ A Google N-Gram search shows that the use of the phrases “going north” and “go north” suddenly spike in the mid nineteenth century (around the time when Prince Albert purchased Balmoral for Queen Victoria), and then continue to rise steadily until 1935.

out, the shooting estate also operated as a status signifier, allowing the newly wealthy to consolidate their social standing through ownership (438). By the 1920s, almost anyone with enough money could participate in the shooting season, thanks to the rise of syndicate shooting (444). At the same time, the emergence of the Scottish Renaissance sought to re-establish Scotland's identity as separate from England and Britain. George Scott Moncrieff's 1932 essay "Balmorality" attacked the Victorian intervention into the Highlands, describing the invention of Scottish tradition as an "English eighteenth-century cult" where a "tartan patchwork quilt" obscures the "treacheries and sordidness of the clan life and of Scottish history" (78). The shooting party in the interwar years was a declining and increasingly contested form of festivity.

Contrary to these factors surrounding the shooting party's decline, periodicals such as *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar* and weekly society tabloids like the *Tatler* and the *Bystander* continued to suggest the shooting season was an integral signifier of upper-class life. The pages of these London-based fashion and society magazines demonstrate the appeal of Scotland as a destination for the English elite, promoting going north as a trendy activity requiring the latest innovations in luxury fashion and equipment. Advertising and feature articles for designer fashions in tweed suits and mackintoshes are rife in the July and August issues of *Vogue*, bringing together the material and spatial: Burberry, for example, invites "ladies who are 'going north'" to examine their "delightful collection of shooting suits" ("Suits for the Moors" 13). The 1932 article, "Suits that Point to the North," emphasises the importance of chic in the perfect outfit for the moors: Hector Powe's offering is "the perfect suit for sporting days in Scotland where to be practical is to be chic," while Busvine's suit follows the "nice new point in chic" via the addition of delicate gilt clips on the jacket (32–33). Magazines also present the act of travelling to the north as a glamorous activity, figuring the journey itself as sophistication. An advertisement for the London Non-Stop Edinburgh Route in *Tatler* in 1928 leaned into the northern sojourn's associations with high society:

“[t]here are places where at the right time Society can be seen foregathered – at the Academy in May, at Ascot in June – or King’s Cross just before the Twelfth – going North” (figure 5.1). It also reinforces romanticised views of the Highlands by riffing on the Scottish song “The Bonnie Banks o’ Loch Lomond.” The pastiche is a form of what Bluemel and Michael McCluskey have termed “rural modernity” (2): it brings the innovation and novelty of the non-stop train into direct relation with the Highland tradition, locating the modern within the regional. Scotland is thus both a fashionable, modern destination for the English upper classes, and a place steeped in alleged tradition.



August 12th

There are places where at the right time Society can be seen foregathered—at the Academy in May, at Ascot in June—or King's Cross just before the Twelfth—going North.

TRAINS FROM KING'S CROSS

RESTAURANT

A.M.	
10.0	"The Flying Scotsman." Edinburgh (NON-STOP), Dundee, Aberdeen, Louis XVI Restaurant.
10.5	Edinburgh, Glasgow, Perth.
11.15	"The Queen of Scots" Pullman, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Dundee.
11.50	Edinburgh, Glasgow, Perth, Inverness.
P.M.	
1.15	Edinburgh, Glasgow.

SLEEPING CAR

P.M.	
7.25	"The Highlandman." Edinburgh, Glasgow, Perth, Inverness.
7.40	"The Aberdonian." Edinburgh, Dundee, Aberdeen.
10.25	"The Night Scotsman." Glasgow, Dundee, Aber- deen, Perth, Inverness.
10.35	Edinburgh, Glasgow.
A.M.	
1.10	After-Theatre Sleeping and Breakfast Car Train. Edinburgh, Glasgow, Dundee, Aberdeen, Perth, Inverness.

Oh! ye'll tak' the high road and I'll tak' the 'rail' road,
And I'll be in Scotland afore ye.

Ask for Pocket Timetable and Tourist Programme
at any L.N.E.R. Station or Office or of the Passen-
ger Manager, Liverpool Street Station, E.C.2, or
L.N.E.R., York

L. N. E. R.
LONDON NON-STOP EDINBURGH ROUTE

Figure 5.1: Advertisement for the London Non-Stop Edinburgh Route, *Tatler*, 8 August 1928, p. xv. © Illustrated London News Ltd / Mary Evans.

When the action of *Highland Fling* moves to Scotland, it becomes evident the Bright Young People too have based their perceptions of the Highlands on its romantic invention and its fashionableness. For Jane, the appeal of the trip lies in the fact that there is “something so very respectable about Scotland” (42): both her parents and peers will approve of her visit. But her train journey north figures the Highlands not as the awe-inspiring vistas of the sublime, but as diminutive. She sees “[p]urple hills [...] covered with little streams and sheep” and her train “stop[s] here and there at little toy stations” (47–48), a sharp contrast to the “sunny fields with immense shadows of trees and hedges” in the English countryside (46), suggesting a hierarchy of value that privileges English landscapes over Scottish ones. Albert, the novel’s greatest enthusiast for the Highlands, is filled with anticipation about the trip, wishing to see “that scenery of bens and braes which is so impregnated with the nineteenth century” (42). For Albert, the Highlands are a restorative retreat for the English: he sees the Scottish landscape as purely Victorian, claiming it “was invented by the Almighty for the delectation of Victoria and Albert” (74). He is “an earnest student of the Victorian era” (42), and his middle name, Memorial, has been self-adopted “out of admiration” for the Albert Memorial in Hyde Park (56). While Albert claims that “[p]atriotism [...] is a virtue which I have never understood” (100), his vision of Scotland is bound up entirely in a restorative nostalgia for an era signalling Englishness, royalty, and upper-class society. But while Albert certainly describes the sublime in his raptures about the Victorians in Scotland, it never physically materialises in the narrative. Albert hopes to see “the stag stand at bay upon its native crags” (63), but when he gets out on the moors and “searche[s] the horizon with his telescope,” he sees only “nothing” (74). Bathos occurs at two levels. Albert’s overwrought descriptions are in themselves bathetic, but the realisation that there is only “nothing” in the landscape generates bathos too, cutting down Albert’s lofty heights in their entirety. By deflating expectation, Mitford reveals the instability of the English aristocracy’s image of the Highlands.

Highland Fling demonstrates Mitford's acute interest in the stuff of social life.

Invented traditions frequently manifest in the material: the significance of tartan kilts and bagpipes, for instance, to the "retrospective invention" of Highland culture (Trevor-Roper 15), or the greeting cards, puddings, and trees central to celebrations of Christmas, which I return to in the following section on *Christmas Pudding*. As Miller describes, studying objects "unpick[s] the more subtle connections with cultural lives and values that are objectified" (D. Miller, "Why" 9). The characters of *Highland Fling* imbue objects with their nostalgia by assigning them particular values. They turn to these objects as a way to make meaning of the world, interpreting them as emblems that affirm class, culture, and national identity. But as Brown writes, it is when objects fail that "[w]e begin to confront the thingness of objects" (B. Brown, "Thing Theory" 4). In *Highland Fling*, the objects privileged by the characters are regularly shown to be fake, broken, or disappointing in a bathetic display that underscores the inauthenticity of restorative nostalgia.

The dangers of loading objects with these sorts of values is compounded by the novel continually iterating that the aristocracy can no longer necessarily be counted on as arbiters of taste. The issue of taste is a recurrent theme throughout Mitford's novels: who possesses it, how they use it, and whether it can imbue its subject with status. "Taste" is deployed in *Highland Fling* not to signify a discerning eye for aesthetic quality, but rather to suggest emptiness and a lack of originality. Characters described as having good taste are shown only to be following the trends: for instance, Jane has "taste without much intellect," and "her brain was like a mirror," meaning she is "completely unoriginal" (43). Likewise, Lady Craigdalloch, Sally's aunt and the owner of Dalloch Castle, is described as having "such good taste," but her renovations to the castle only buy into short-lived fads rather than timeless design (61). The castle's exteriors are a marvel to Albert upon his arrival: built in 1860, the castle is "in the Victorian feudal style [...] a large white cake with windows and battlements picked out in chocolate icing" (53). But to Albert's disappointment, the "hand of

the modern decorator is already upon it," transforming it from Victorian triumph to travesty (52). In response, Albert begins photographing various nineteenth-century items, such as "bead stools, lacquer boxes, wax flowers and albums of water-colour sketches," in a bid to capture the castle's declining Victorianism before it is lost forever (79). Dalloch's new interiors are a combination of sham eighteenth-century and modernist styles: the drawing-room has been painted green, echoing Georgian interior colour schemes which were in vogue in the 1930s (McKellar 325), and the oak staircase has been pickled, "a modern habit" (*Highland Fling* 52).⁵ Much of the castle's original Victorian furniture and décor has been placed in storage, replaced by neo-Georgian goods from Heal's. These renovations are an attempt by Lady Craigdalloch to blend tradition with modernity, but they ultimately undermine any tradition Dalloch Castle might have, erasing its truly authentic features. As Ahmed writes, "emotions are directed to what we come into contact with" (*Queer Phenomenology* 2): Lady Craigdalloch's glossy revisions to Dalloch's interiors enable her nostalgia for an earlier time. Restorative nostalgia has no use for "patina, ruins, cracks, imperfections," instead seeking to present a perfect past in the present (Boym 237). As Alison Light argues, the popularity of the neo-Georgian in the early twentieth century conjured "a mythical *Georgian* period, a tidied-up patrician version of the past, and an historically quite limited understanding of heterogeneous English cultural life" (35–36). By implementing neo-eighteenth-century and contemporary design in a nineteenth-century home, Lady Craigdalloch makes Dalloch exemplary of the "commodified authentic," binding together the commercial and the non-commercial and appealing to nostalgic sensibilities by fusing authenticity and modernity (Outka 4–5). Lady Craigdalloch's implementation of the new, then, is also an appeal to an idealised past, but a past that predates Dalloch and erases Dalloch's actual authenticity in the process.

⁵ Pickling is a technique similar to whitewashing that lightens the natural colour of wood.

Against this backdrop of muddled history, Mitford satirises how the shooting party is used to legitimate status when the foundations of the shooting party itself are shaky. But the specific form of the shooting party itself makes it one of the most rigid forms of sociability: legislation restricts the duration of the shooting season, and strict rules govern its proceedings due to the involvement of guns. As its format is so prescriptive, this generates significant room for error for uninitiated participants – something which Mitford capitalises on to comic effect in the novel. It is not surprising, then, that there is also a significant body of interwar material that describes what constitutes proper shooting party conduct. For instance, Eric Parker's *Elements of Shooting* (1930), an introductory guide to learning to shoot, dedicates an entire chapter to gun safety. There are also aspects of etiquette for the non-shooters to consider, and several interwar etiquette guides – themselves mechanical and inelastic in their prescriptiveness – include sections on shooting parties. Vincent, in *Good Manners* (1924), claims there is “little formality” involved with a shooting party, yet goes on to warn her readers that the shooters will frown upon any action “that would alarm the birds,” such as “loud talking” and wearing “bright colours” (147). Lady Laura Troubridge's *The Book of Etiquette* (1926) also confirms that such actions are unacceptable (112), adding that it is important to recognise that “most hosts object strongly” to women coming along for the shooting (147). June and Doris Langley Moore note that shooting is still primarily a “masculine preserve,” and that women should only attend if they are explicitly invited (268). Mitford herself provided commentary on shooting party etiquette in the article “The Shooting Party: Some Hints for the Woman Guest” published in *Vogue* in 1929, which recommends keeping one's spirits up during the shooting drives by remembering that “no afternoon lasts for ever” (9). However, the article ends on a strangely positive note: once you arrive home, Mitford writes, “you will appreciate [...] the feeling that in spite of being a woman, you do count for something there” and will happily “accept two more shooting invitations which were waiting for you” (9). The experience, no matter how miserable it may

be at the time, is retrospectively fulfilling because it reinforces one's position in the upper strata of society.

The Bright Young People in *Highland Fling* ignore every piece of advice that these etiquette guides and Mitford's article dispense. While General Murgatroyd frames the shooting as an appropriate day for the non-shooters to come along because "it's all easy walking" (63), the Bright Young People find this is anything but the case. Jane refuses to pick up the dead birds, trips over "continually," and eventually falls in an "ice-cold" river (69), which leaves her in "tears of self-pity and boredom" (71). Moreover, Jane misinterprets the etiquette and rituals that structure shooting parties, reading her companions' gruff comments as insults rather than safety warnings. Required to keep in a straight line for one last attempt at shooting birds, she is warned to "[k]eep in line, please, or you'll be shot" (71) – a clear caution designed to avoid danger, as Parker outlines (64). But Jane reads this as a threat, imagining being personally taken aside and executed for this transgression: "it seemed almost uncivilized to threaten an acquaintance that she must keep up or be shot" (71). Even the most promising part of the day – lunch – is a disappointment: there is not enough food, leaving "everyone [...] to take a little more than his or her share and [...] eat it quickly for fear the others should notice" (72). When Sally and Albert join the group, they break even more rules: Albert wears an "orange crêpe de Chine shirt" and "orange-and-brown tartan trousers," which are too bright for the birds (72), Lady Prague cautions Sally and Jane for laughing too loudly, and Albert points a gun in the General's face. When they finally return to Dalloch Castle, Jane takes sick from the cold, and spends the entire next day in bed, "entertaining riotous parties" (78), and the Bright Young People never join the others for shooting again at any stage in the novel. The Bright Young People's naivety, though, is not necessarily deliberate. Because they grew up during the First World War – a period when many pastimes were suspended – they were unable to learn the conventions of the shooting party properly. As Albert tells General Murgatroyd in a heated argument, the war

“was never anything to do with us. It was your war and I hope you enjoyed it” (98). But the disastrous event also demonstrates that while shooting is an outdated mode of entertainment for the younger generation, the act of staying at a Highland estate is enough to assert social superiority. The two generations participate in the shooting party in different ways in order to generate the same ends. While the Bright Young People have parties in “each other’s bedrooms,” with “the gramophone playing till two and three in the morning,” (108), the others are involved with more conventional forms of country house party pastimes: playing billiards, going fishing, and after-dinner paper games. For General Murgatroyd, the Bright Young People will be “the downfall of England” because they eschew the activities that to him define Englishness (108). He fails to realise that the shooting party itself indicates English fashionableness for the Bright Young People: just the act of accepting an invitation north confirms sophistication.

The aristocratic engagement with the Highland myth reaches its climax when the group go on a day excursion to see some local Highland games. Mr Buggins, a guest at Dalloch who is an avid Highlands enthusiast, orchestrates the plan, promising the others an insight into a “typical aspect of the national life” (123). But no real joy is derived from the outing. The car carrying Mr Buggins and the Bright Young People travels “through typical Highland scenery,” on its way to a scenic lookout for a picnic lunch; the lookout itself is nothing more than “a large yellowish mountain commanding an interminable prospect of other mountains” (126), far from a splendid landscape. A fleeting moment of “delicious feeling” is usurped into “ghastly silence” when the group realise they have eaten the picnic lunch in its entirety before the second car carrying the remaining guests has even arrived (127). Deciding to pretend the picnic basket fell out of the car on the journey, the group then endure a second, “nauseating” lunch at a local restaurant (131), an early sign that the adventure will not materialise in the way Mr Buggins promised.

Albert loads his expectations about culture and national identity onto the games through its participants and the garments they wear: he expects “savage Highlanders, in philabeg and bonnet, performing unheard-of feats” (134). But the games themselves are not at all what the younger generation anticipate: they are “an extraordinary spectacle of apparently meaningless activity” (133). Albert is “bitterly disappointed” to discover the competitors are “[m]en of [...] insignificant physique” who are “worse than little boys at their private school sports” (133–34). His idealised view of the Highlands – which generates his nostalgia – is shattered by the dullness of the event, and the experience becomes bathetic. Fredric V. Bogel suggests Pope’s essay presents the relationship between the lofty and the low in several, often conflicting, ways (221). While this relation is indeed at times presented as a binary opposition, in other moments, such as Pope’s discussion of the “Lowlands,” the sublime and bathos are “separated by nothing more definitive than a difference in elevation on a slope that is at times exceedingly slippery” (222). At any moment, then, one can fall catastrophically into deflationary comedy. The sudden crash into bathos reveals the fragility of invented traditions and class distinction, as the Highland games show: in a flash, “unheard-of feats” are nothing more than amateur “private school sports.”

The shooting party reaches a premature end when a fire destroys Dalloch Castle: the only things the guests have time to save are the home’s Victorian furniture and décor, leaving the flames to consume the castle’s more modern elements (149). After learning of the fire, Lady Craigdalloch consoles herself with the thought that the “Victorian rubbish” is gone forever; she is left in “horror and amazement” when she realises this rubbish has been saved (151). A newspaper article later indicates the Craigdallochs are planning to rebuild the castle and speculates that it will be “an immense improvement,” because Lady Craigdalloch has “exquisite taste” (167). For Albert, this is a travesty because his version of restorative nostalgia is precisely bound up in the rescued Victorian objects, which will surely now be cast away or destroyed: he imagines the new castle will be “a building in the best cenotaph

style" (167). Given Lady Craigdalloch's previous alterations to Dalloch, it is safe to assume the new building, too, will be exemplary of the commodified authentic, offering a slice of a recreated past that is not authentic to its locale.

The Highland setting of the shooting party in *Highland Fling* operates as a site of restorative nostalgia, a place where the past is perfectly returned in the present. However, Mitford uses bathos to critique this restorative approach, highlighting that the English involvement in the Highlands is an invented tradition – one that in itself lacks authenticity.

Merrie England: *Christmas Pudding*

An advertisement in the *Sunday Times* for Mitford's second novel, *Christmas Pudding*, promises it "is even more *subtle*, more *wicked*, AND more *deliciously amusing*" than *Highland Fling* ("New Humorist" 895). In the novel's opening pages, it becomes clear that bathos – in both form and content – generates much of this delicious amusement. The protagonist, Paul Fotheringay, is mournfully seated in the Tate Gallery, gazing at "some rather inferior examples of pre-Raphaelitism" and contemplating his "inward wretchedness" (7–8). His anguish is due to the reception of his debut novel, *Crazy Capers*: while it has received critical acclaim and admiration, it is for all the wrong reasons. The novel – intended as an "exact blend of tragedy and pathos" (10) – has instead been praised as the comic novel of the year: pathos has become bathos. Even his on-off girlfriend, the flighty Marcella Brackett, "roared with laughter from beginning to end," and is blind to Paul's true authorial intentions (11). As Paul gloomily stares at a painting of "Mrs. Rossetti," he ponders his troubles, a description that is in itself bathetic:

Nevertheless how could praise or promise of fluttering gain compensate in any way to the unhappy Paul for the fact that his book, the child of his soul upon which he had expended over a year of labour, pouring forth into it all the bitterness of a bitter

nature; describing earnestly, as he thought, and with passion, the subtle shades of a young man's psychology, and rising to what seemed to him an almost unbearably tragic climax with the suicide pact of his hero and heroine, had been hailed with delight on every hand as the funniest, most roaringly farcical piece of work published for years. He who has written with one goal always before him, sincere approbation from the very few, the exquisitely cultured, was now to be held up as a clown and buffoon to jeers and senseless laughter from the mob. (8)

The first sentence rambles through a variety of terms with writerly connotations: "the child of his soul"; "pouring forth"; "describing earnestly [...] and with passion." As the passage progresses, it descends from high to low, with its concluding clause destabilising all that comes before it: *Crazy Capers* is "the funniest, most roaringly farcical piece of work." Paul is himself a figure of bathos: "when a Man is set with his Head downward, and his Breech upright, his Degradation is compleat" (Pope 201). He is denied highbrow cultural capital, and only elevated to fame thanks to the crass "mob." Like his namesake in Waugh's *Decline and Fall*, Paul's narrative in *Christmas Pudding* begins with humiliation.

I begin with this comically tragic scene because it establishes the novel's central theme: that overly earnest persons leave themselves open to laughter, and therefore critique. As its title suggests, the events of *Christmas Pudding* take place over the winter holiday season in the English countryside. Paul hopes to follow up *Crazy Capers* with a biography of the Victorian poet Lady Maria Bobbin but needs access to her private papers, stored at the family country estate. When the current Lady Bobbin refuses his request, Paul is forced to resort to more devious means and is hired under a false name as a tutor to Lady Bobbin's son, Bobby, for the school holidays. However, the pair eschew Bobby's education in favour of visiting nearby friends: Amabelle Fortescue, a society hostess, and her guests Walter and Sally (from *Highland Fling*). Several festivities take place in the novel, but it is the

celebrations on Christmas Day that Mitford uses to critique upper-class engagement with sham traditions.

Like *Highland Fling*, the novel critiques the attempt to invoke a mythologised utopian past as a way to maintain a sense of tradition. Mitford's target is Merrie England, an idealised version of pre-industrial England that implies that a pervading sense of festivity and play characterised the pastoral way of life in early modern times. As such, the concept plays heavily into ideas of Englishness and nostalgia for an unknown, simpler past. But, as Roy Judge writes, it is "a world that has never actually existed, a visionary, mythical landscape" (131). Merrie England was particularly idealised during the Victorian and Edwardian eras, reviving festive folk forms such as the maypole and Morris dancing. During this time, Christmas too came to be an embodiment of Merrie England. As Mark Connelly notes, Christmas became closely associated with the Tudor and Stuart periods from the late eighteenth century onwards because these eras were perceived as the pinnacle of being merry (19, 22). Moreover, the Victorians understood Christmas and Englishness to be one and the same (43). *Christmas Pudding* critiques this nostalgia for Merrie England in two different ways. In her excessive enthusiasm, the novel's most dedicated supporter of Merrie England, Lady Bobbin, strips Christmas of all its festive joy for her guests. At the same time, the younger generation are disgruntled when they realise reality does not match up to the romanticised version they had envisaged. The novel's depiction of Christmas as bathetic displays the trappings of restorative nostalgia: idealising the past too heavily gives way to a disappointing festive experience and obscures one's ability to think critically about the relationship between past and present.

Scholars often read Christmas in Britain as being an invented tradition of the Victorians, as Neil Armstrong notes in his survey of the topic (119). While some suggest this process was more of a reinvention than invention (see Hutton 112; Connelly 43), there is consensus that the modern form of Christmas is primarily based on its Victorian iteration.

Many of the material elements of Christmas thought of as traditions in Britain and the Commonwealth—such as Christmas trees and cards—were only established in England in the Victorian era (see, for example: Johnes 75; D. Miller, “Theory” 4; Storey 20). The dedication to adhering to Christmas traditions, as Martin Johnes argues, was part of a “widespread popular reverence for days gone by, real or imagined” (73). Against the flows of modernity in the interwar years, there was a concerted effort to adhere to doing things in the old-fashioned style, and for some, this meant Christmas was celebrated in the style of Merrie England (73).

The novel’s title immediately demonstrates the novel’s interest in specifically Victorian festive traditions: it was not until the nineteenth century that Christmas pudding emerged as a staple of the Christmas table (O’Connor 131). Paul’s reasoning for coming to the countryside further emphasises this focus on the Victorian: he hopes to write Lady Maria Bobbin’s biography, in a bid to assuage the sting of *Crazy Capers*’s misinterpretation. The biography is designed to put Paul back on track, but the contents of Lady Maria’s diary thoroughly dismantle any pretensions at literary seriousness. Her writing is excessively (and bathetically) Victorian, filled with overwrought and pious passages: “[p]rayed [...] that I and my Dear Ones may be able to bear everything that is in store for us” (68). Yet Paul remains oblivious to what the diaries indicate about Lady Maria: she is not a particularly interesting figure for a biography. The only highlights of the diaries are comments on her husband’s fondness of food. This reaches its comic extreme as Lady Maria recounts Josiah’s final words on his deathbed in a sort of reverse bathos. She recasts the lowly “[b]ring me the oysters” as a lofty religious statement: “[b]ury me in the cloisters” (80). Her poetry, too, lacks refinement, exemplified through the cheesily named collection titled “Elegant Elegies, Tasteful Trifles and Maidenly Melodies” (32). To write a biography of Lady Maria, then, would only further entrench Paul’s status as a comic writer, something which he remains unaware of for the entirety of the novel. While the world Lady Maria inhabits is the one her

descendants – namely, Lady Bobbin – want to return to because of its removal from modernity, Lady Maria's diaries and poetry show this period to be dull, undesirable, and most importantly, laughable.

As in *Highland Fling*, Mitford establishes the party's setting as a place that complicates and indeed contradicts its owner's desire to follow tradition. Style and taste are again central: Mitford's descriptions show recent generations are devoid of these qualities. A "large, square and not unhandsome building," the Bobbin estate, Compton Bobbin, was once home to "people of taste and culture," but "the evidences of their existence have been so adequately concealed by the generations which succeeded them" (54). Many of the objects that embody the taste and culture of ancestors past have been poorly treated: the "Chinese Chippendale mirror" hangs broken in the servants' passage; several Rococo paintings are "dirty and neglected"; and the "Venetian glass chandelier" has been "ruined by electric wiring" (55). What now reigns supreme at Compton Bobbin are the "stufiest" remnants of all that has come before: "[s]tained glass windows," "stamped leather chairs," and "embossed wallpaper" (55). These features have all been "rendered even more horrible" via the addition of electric lighting and contemporary styles of furniture arrangement (56). The estate's haphazardness, with its scattered and dilapidated objects ranging from the eighteenth century to the modern, contributes to its own inauthenticity.

However, the person charged with erasing much of the estate's history, Lady Bobbin, also champions a return to the past. Lady Bobbin is typical of "that single adjective so expressive of its own dreary meaning: 'plain'" (56). She steadfastly refuses anything suggesting modernity: champagne is "the very sort of thing that breeds socialism" and cocktails are a "most pernicious and disgusting" habit (65–66). She is an "ardent and determined Merrie Englander" who regularly organises maypoles, masques, madrigals, and Morris dances in the village (106), reflecting Boym's characterisation of the "nearly apocalyptic vengeance" that restorative nostalgics attempt to restore tradition with (235).

The imagined period of Merrie England is “perfection” to Lady Bobbin: she sees it as a time removed from the advent of modernity, when there were no “motor cars” or “socialism,” the latter of which threatens her class (106). Lady Bobbin’s enthusiasm for invented tradition manifests itself most strongly in Christmas, celebrating it in what she describes as “good old-fashioned style” (106). The entire extended Bobbin family is invited to stay at Compton Bobbin, and the festivities are filled with a multitude of Victorian Christmas traditions, including Christmas trees, “mistletoe and holly,” turkey, carollers and mummers (107). But Lady Bobbin’s enthusiasm for things done in the “good old-fashioned style” does not align with Compton Bobbin’s interiors, which lack both taste and authenticity. Good old-fashioned style, Mitford suggests, can never be expressed in a home lacking legitimacy. Moreover, good old-fashioned style itself is not legitimate: like “taste” in *Highland Fling*, the word “style” in *Christmas Pudding* signifies its opposite. Lady Bobbin’s fervour for good old-fashioned style is anchored in Victorian tradition—but the only reference point to the Victorian period in the novel is her ancestor Lady Maria, whose diaries depict the era as being a truly tedious experience.

Advice on how to celebrate Christmas in the pages of interwar entertaining guides and magazines echo Lady Bobbin’s fondness for good old-fashioned style, reflecting a similar desire for a Victorian Christmas. Interestingly, this discourse cuts across both texts understood as being traditionally conservative (such as etiquette guides) and those seen as emblematic of modernity (like fashion periodicals). In *Foulsham’s Guest Entertainer* (1925), Woodman dedicates an entire chapter to how to successfully host “An Old-Fashioned Christmas Dinner Party” (62). The day’s importance is due to its scale: it is a day with “more hosts and guests” than any other day, and it is “when the hostess feels her important position most” (62). The December 1930 issue of *Harper’s Bazaar* called for its readers to “have a Victorian Christmas this year” and to “be merry in the old ways” (Gavin 7). The article argues that modern times have meant that “welcome of the maître d’hôtel means

more" to people "than the shrill family trebles that greet the homecomers at Christmas," and advocates for a return to this "real home atmosphere" (7). The article's emphasis on various elements of Christmas celebrations being authentic and traditional is a strong and repetitive thread throughout. The "holly-and-mistletoe, turkey-and-plum-pudding week-end" is "real old-fashioned"; the games are played "in the good old way"; the Christmas tree is "old-fashioned"; and one's spirits should be kept up "in the good old way" (7). Celebrating an old-fashioned Christmas at home with family also offers a means to combat the atomising experience of modern life. But at the same time, the article's conflation of Victorian with old-fashioned also reveals a strain of restorative nostalgia: it implies that for Christmas to be at all enjoyable, it must seek out forms of celebration from the past. The nationalising project of Christmas invented traditions is apparent in the December 1931 issue of *Harper's Bazaar*, where St. Vincent Troubridge argues that Christmas is inextricably connected to Englishness, describing it as a "festival [...] as national as the Derby" (20). Even "the Brightest of the Bright Young People," known for abjuring tradition, come over with "Dickensian symptoms" (20). Christmas, then, is an opportunity to reaffirm nation – but a version of nation that speaks to an idealised Victorian (and by extension, Elizabethan) past.

Lady Bobbin carries out the proceedings of the big day with "the thoroughness and attention to detail of a general leading his army into battle" (116). Johnes has shown the stresses and anxieties associated with organising and hosting Christmas gatherings were already well established in the interwar period (55–56, 102). But Mitford's novel also displays the discomfort and ugly feelings encountered by the guests in these situations. The sense of play that is meant to pervade Lady Bobbin's idealised Merrie England is nowhere to be found. Instead, the event is marked by its inflexibility. Lady Bobbin's invitations to her extended family, rather than being pleasant gestures of kindness, are "summon[s]" which her relations "find [...] convenient to obey" (107). One guest, Squibby Almanack, "dread[s]" the event "all the year round," and Bobby and his sister Philadelphia share "a sort of

mirthful disgust" about the entire event (107). Ultimately, it is Lady Bobbin's enthusiasm for tradition that makes the day so unenjoyable for everyone else: she is so keen to continually replicate the same traditions year after year that it becomes repetitive and stultifying for others. For instance, the day begins with the opening of stockings, all which Lady Bobbin fills with the same gifts every single year: each guest receives a miscellany of dull and useless knick-knacks ("a mouth organ, a ball of string, a penknife, an instrument for taking stones out of horses' shoes" [116]). By luncheon, "any feelings of Christmas goodwill [...] had quite evaporated," and the sound of a "furious argument among the grown-ups" on the merits of socialism fills the dining room (117). Lady Bobbin does not leave the development of feelings of goodwill and enjoyment "to chance"; rather, she gives her guests "marching orders" that dictate how they should feel and respond to the day's festivities (116). But in transforming positive affects into orders, they become laborious instead of organic, and in turn, lose their pleasurableness: what Bergson would describe as the mechanical becoming encrusted upon the living. Lady Bobbin can never realise her vision of a Christmas embodying Merrie England because the excessively manufactured celebrations erase any joy they may produce – echoing the artificiality of Merrie England itself as a construct.

Mitford contrasts Lady Bobbin's intense enthusiasm for Merrie England and tradition with the group staying at a nearby cottage – Amabelle, Walter, and Sally, all of whom have chosen to spend Christmas with friends rather than family. Walter and Sally are also financially motivated to spend the Christmas season away: it means they can let their flat in London and live at the expense of Amabelle, instead of spending their own money. Moreover, Sally finds it "[s]uch a comfort" that the cottage is small because this limits the amount of money she needs to spend on Christmas presents for others, stripping Christmas of its goodwill (44). Their own Christmas celebrations are glossed over entirely in the narrative, pointing to their relative insignificance compared to the strict festivities enforced at Compton Bobbin. But again, the setting goes against the nature of its inhabitants. Rented

by Amabelle without viewing it first, the cottage is named "Mulberrie Farm," and the agent markets it to her as being full of "old-world charm" (45). Amabelle is hoping to buy into an image of Englishness and tradition, but, as Walter points out to her, she has "made the mistake [...] of confusing old world with olde worlde" (45). The house is simply rustic, rather than the rustic chic she expected: all it needs are "some rushes to strew about the floor" (46). While Compton Bobbin is devoid of the spirit of Merrie England, Mulberrie Farm is too authentic to its period, not sanitised enough. Struggling to find things to do in a place where there are "twice as many [hours in the day] [...] as there are in London," Amabelle "resign[s]" herself "to playing the gramophone and gossiping," thoroughly modern pursuits (48). While Compton Bobbin lacks authenticity, its owner loves the idea of tradition; Mulberrie Farm, conversely, is authentically rural but without inhabitants who can appreciate it. Because the characters' idealised expectations about the landscape are so divorced from the reality they are confronted with, they struggle to orientate themselves in their surroundings. The farm and its surrounding landscape become bathetic: the idyllic promised "lonely wolds" are nothing more than "[o]rdinary fields full of mud [...] covered with cows and awful staring men in filthy clothes" (47). "Everything," Amabelle remarks, "seems to be so queer and awful" (47).

While the festive season at Compton Bobbin is undeniably dull, the celebrations at Mulberrie Farm are not treated positively either. When Bobby and Paul come to visit the farm, they find its inhabitants "in attitudes of deathlike exhaustion," hungover after attending a New Year's fancy dress party in London, an attempt to escape the boredom of the country (136). However, Sally and Amabelle's experience of the party is contradictory: the evening was "[s]imply grand" and "lovely," but also "just like any party"; it was filled with "discomfort and boredom," yet it was "divine fun" (137-38). The instability of this affective terrain suggests no form of festivity, whether in the city or country, is ultimately satisfying. Walter, meanwhile, is nowhere to be seen after disappearing during the event,

presumed to have “got off” with somebody (138). While Sally asserts he must be having a “gorgeous” time, she worries he may have met with misfortune (138); when he finally returns home, he characterises the experience as “lousy” (140). Their stay at Mulberrie Farm may be dull, but more cosmopolitan forms of celebration are also unable to satisfy their search for entertainment.

Christmas Pudding highlights the limitations and the ultimately unfulfilling nature of restorative nostalgia. When its project of restoring the past is pressed too heavily upon festivities, they lose their sense of play, becoming stultifying; when the past is idealised too much, its authentic version becomes undesirable. The traditions of Christmas – largely invented by the Victorians – are unable to generate the cheer they promise. However, modern styles of celebrating the festive season too only result in boredom. Mitford critiques both of these approaches: the characters’ inability to engage critically and flexibly with both past and present means they cannot achieve a positive festive experience. At the end of the novel, Paul still has not learned anything about bathos. The final sentence of the novel sees him “settl[ing] down to write the first chapter of his *Life and Works of Lady Maria Bobbin*” (202), suggesting Paul is doomed to repeat the same mistake he made with *Crazy Capers*: pathos will once again become bathos.

Pageant Plays, Fascism, and Englishness: *Wigs on the Green*

Mitford’s most controversial novel, *Wigs on the Green*, adds another layer to how the past is constructed and understood by considering how history is used to promote radical ideology. Published before the outbreak of the Second World War, *Wigs on the Green* is a romantic comedy that lampoons the aristocracy for their fascist sympathies. The novel critiques fascist ideology through the invented tradition of the pageant play, taking issue with fascism’s attempts to manipulate history by positioning a return to the past as the only way to

progress in the future. Here, restorative nostalgia takes on explicitly political tones, serving to advance right-wing rhetoric. Mitford's motivation for writing the novel was based on her observations of two of her sisters, who were becoming increasingly committed to radical politics.⁶ By 1935, both Unity and Diana had seriously dedicated themselves to the fascist movement. Diana had abandoned her high-profile society marriage to become the mistress of Oswald Mosley, the leader of the British Union of Fascists (BUF), and Unity had several extended stays in Nazi Germany throughout the 1930s. Mitford's attempts to mask her targets in the novel are half-hearted at best: fascism becomes "Social Unionism," Mosley is "Captain Jack," and his followers, the Blackshirts, are the "Union Jackshirts" (13). Unity – a dedicated and somewhat fanatical admirer and defender of Hitler – is the inspiration for the novel's heroine.

Mitford maintained to Diana that *Wigs on the Green* was as a whole "very pro-Fascism" with only "one or two jokes" (*Love* 63). But Mitford's claim does not hold up against a close reading of the text. The bulk of the novel's action unfolds in the village of Chalford, where Noel Foster and Jasper Aspect have travelled in the hope of marrying one of the richest young women in the country, Eugenia Malmains. They quickly learn, however, that Eugenia is one of the most devoted supporters of Social Unionism. Over the course of the novel, Noel and Jasper – along with two wealthy women also visiting the village, Poppy St. Julien and Marjorie Merrith – are recruited to the movement. Eugenia is an

⁶ Mitford also briefly entertained the idea of fascism herself. She joined the BUF for a few months in 1934, but the violent events of the Olympia rally in June that year marked the moment when Mitford began to find fascism's extremism particularly objectionable (Mosley 34). As a result, Mitford soon positioned herself not just against fascist extremism, but all political extremism. The unwavering belief that extremists had in their politics went against Mitford's philosophy that "nothing in life should be taken too seriously" (34).

exaggerated figure, who preaches in the village green on an upturned bathtub to tiny crowds and greets everyone with “Hail!” (35); the Union Jackshirts, meanwhile, intimidate their enemies by flinging them into duck ponds. The novel culminates in a garden pageant play organised by the group, which is meant to be a re-enactment of George III and Queen Charlotte’s visit to Chalford in the 1700s, but quickly evolves into a chaotic battle between the Social Unionists and their sworn enemies, the peace-loving Pacifists. Mitford treats Social Unionism mockingly: fascism itself is bathos. It is not surprising that once the book was published, Diana was seriously offended and the relationship between the sisters cooled considerably (Hastings 104).

Reviewing *Wigs on the Green* in the *Sunday Times* upon its release, Ralph Straus described the novel as “a delicious piece of buffoonery which can hardly be read without chuckles” (“Problems” 9). It became more difficult to praise the novel for its humour, however, after the events of the Second World War, and Mitford refused to have the novel reprinted in her lifetime. When her publisher Hamish Hamilton offered to rerelease her pre-war novels in 1951, Mitford felt “[t]oo much has happened for jokes about Nazis to be regarded as funny or as anything but the worst of taste” (Mitford and Waugh 249).⁷ The pleasures of reading *Wigs on the Green* in the twenty-first century are certainly troubling. For contemporary readers, it is a novel where—to borrow the words of Berlant and Ngai—“the funny is always tripping over the not funny” (234). There is considerable tension between laughing at how Mitford shamelessly sends up extremist politics while being highly conscious of the serious events caused by fascism and Nazism in the Second World War. Mitford was not alone in poking fun at Mosley and British fascism in the interwar years, as

⁷ The Popular Library republished *Wigs on the Green* in a two-in-one volume alongside *Highland Fling* in 1976. The novel then remained out of print for more than thirty years before Penguin republished it in 2010, as part of a wider reissue of Mitford’s novels.

P. G. Wodehouse's Sir Roderick Spode in *The Code of the Woosters* (1938) and Huxley's partial portrait in the character of Everard Webley from *Point Counter Point* (1928) illustrate. But what separates Mitford's work from that of Wodehouse and Huxley is her use of "weak commitments" to generate the novel's laughter and critique: that is, the idea that one could attach themselves to someone or something without having to follow through with its consequences.⁸ Weak commitments manifest in both the novel's form and content. Mitford's characters—flippant, textually flat, and lacking in interiority—are weakly committed to politics, history, and each other. These weak commitments create much of the bathos in *Wigs on the Green*, advancing Mitford's critique of fascism.

Wigs on the Green establishes its concern with the relationships between fascism, Englishness, tradition, and modernity at its outset when Noel and Jasper first encounter Eugenia giving an impassioned speech on Chalford's village green. The focus of her speech is the degradation of modern society:

Respect for parents, love of the home, veneration of the marriage tie, are all at a discount in England today, society is rotten with vice, selfishness, and indolence. The rich have betrayed their trust, preferring the fetid atmosphere of cocktail-bars and night-clubs to the sanity of a useful country life. The great houses of England, one of her most envied attributes, stand empty—why? Because the great families of England herd together in luxury flats and spend their patrimony in the divorce courts. (9)

In Eugenia's eyes, the modern state of England is a disgrace due to the decay of traditional values: the only way for progress is a return to the past, a key element of Mosley's vision for a fascist Britain. Eugenia's speech also immediately links the aristocracy to these concerns, as

⁸ This tendency towards flippancy was rife in Mitford's personal circle and sophisticated society life in the interwar years, as seen already in Chapter 3 with Waugh's disgruntled views on chucking.

they are the “great families” who own these vast country estates. Mitford was particularly interested in the ways her own class, the aristocracy, responded to and embraced fascist ideas. The novel’s main characters are aristocratic, and almost all of them convert to Social Unionism over the course of the novel. The aristocratic involvement with the BUF itself in the 1930s was relatively minor (Gottlieb 197), but as Judy Suh notes, many aristocrats had broader fascist sympathies because they believed it offered a way to “sustain authentic forms of Englishness,” including the class hierarchies that benefited them so greatly (133). Mosley was an “aristocratic rebel” who turned towards fascism to combat the decay of his class (Gottlieb 177). His family’s ancestral estate had been sold in the early 1920s, and Mosley wanted to restore the feudal ideals of his childhood, a view that resounded with others who had faced (or were facing) a similar situation (Cannadine 548–49). Much in the same way, Eugenia’s speech immediately resonates with Jasper, who comments that while she is a “lunatic,” she is “not stupid” (9). The ideas within the speech—a decline in traditional values, the abandoned country house, the deterioration of the aristocracy—reflect and document Jasper’s concerns. Jasper is particularly keen to restore the former glamour of the country estate. Upon seeing Eugenia’s home, the eighteenth-century Chalford Park, for the first time, he suggests the Captain should introduce a law forcing “all really beautiful houses” to be “preserved and occupied,” as it is “the most horrible feature of this age that so many are being destroyed” (36). As Sterry observes, in the fiction of the period the eighteenth-century estate is both an “aristocratic emblem” and “a model for how the rural landscape could be appropriated to help sustain class divisions” (65). The spatial expansiveness of the country estate, combined with the material objects within its rooms, are essential signifiers of aristocratic identity and actively participate in retrenching hierarchies of power. For Jasper, maintaining the country home also means the maintenance of his class—and of Englishness. His call for legislative measures chimes with and anticipates late interwar moves to preserve the aristocratic home for the nation. The preservationist

movement, as David Matless argues, was “not a conservative protection of the old against the new but an attempt to plan a landscape simultaneously modern and traditional under the guidance of an expert public authority” (25). Though “conducted in an atmosphere of salvage” (222), the introduction of the National Trust Country House Scheme in 1936, alongside the National Trust Act of 1937, allowed owners of country estates to remain in residence and avoid death duties by transferring ownership to the Trust and allowing public access to their estate.

The novel positions the characters who become affiliated with Social Unionism throughout the novel as inherently flawed, shown to become Union Jackshirts without any sustained consideration, furthering Mitford’s representation of fascism as bathos. The first recruits, Noel and Jasper, only join the movement as a means of pursuing Eugenia romantically, while others, like Marjorie’s love interest Mr Wilkins, are attracted to its lighter aspects: he tells Eugenia he will join the party with “pleasure,” on the proviso they are “against foreigners and the League of Nations” (89). Eugenia, then, is the most dedicated to Social Unionism: for all her success in converting the others, none ever exhibits the same level of fanaticism or enthusiasm for the movement. For example, when the Union Jackshirts’ headquarters burn to the ground in an arson attack, Eugenia is out for blood, but the others quickly pacify her threats of retaliatory violence. Noel meets her greeting of “Hail!” with the facetious reply “[s]now” (34), Poppy discourages Eugenia from dispensing “justice” on a Pacifist because “we’re all much too tired” (75), and the local village beauty Mrs Lace describes the group’s involvement with Social Unionism as being “all a joke” (78). Mitford levels her critique at two very different types of political engagement: extremists such as Eugenia (and by extension, Diana and Unity), who take themselves and their politics far too seriously, and those who weakly commit to a particular brand of politics without necessarily understanding its loaded implications.

The inability of the characters to question the politics they have embedded themselves in reflects their broader struggles with decision making. Impulse drives the majority of the central cast of characters, and it is their failure to wholly commit that sees them end up in Chalford in the first place. Noel comes into some money and immediately decides to quit his job to search for an heiress to marry instead; Jasper seems to have no obligations to keep him from doing as he pleases, but is terrible with money and relies on others to bankroll his activities; Marjorie has jilted her fiancé only days before the wedding; and Poppy is running away from her husband because he is having an affair with a debutante. Their incapability to sincerely dedicate themselves – whether it be to work, politics, relationships, ideas, or money – gives the novel much of its comic and bathetic frivolity. In doing so, Mitford suggests the susceptibility for the aristocracy to fall into radical politics is due to their inability to see the broader ramifications of given circumstances. For instance, Poppy readily admits to not knowing “a thing about politics,” yet is confident that “Hitler must be a wonderful man,” simply because he has “forbidden German women to work in offices and told them they never need worry about anything again, except arranging the flowers” (37). Rather than seeing Social Unionism for what it is – a form of radical politics – Poppy views it as an opportunity to reinforce what she enjoys most: leisure and pleasure. Likewise, her dedication to her marriage (despite her husband’s cheating ways) is not out of love, but because she fears not having enough money. A conversation between her and Jasper demonstrates her superficiality: trying to engage her on the topic of nihilism, Jasper tells Poppy that she is like all other women because “you only care about personalities, things don’t interest you” (99). Poppy’s response (“I’m fearfully interested in things – I absolutely long for a sable coat”) shows she misreads Jasper’s words. While Jasper is using “things” to refer to the abstract and the intellectual, Poppy immediately thinks of “things” in their material form, as objects, revealing her shallowness (99). This interest in things *qua* objects continues throughout the novel. For

instance, after Jasper's wealthy uncle gifts Poppy a diamond tiara, Jasper proposes they sell it to pay for their wedding and living expenses, but Poppy sees the item as her possession: "I don't somehow think I intend to sell *my* tiara" (134, emphasis added). Mitford suggests that people like Poppy are vulnerable to restorative nostalgia and the alluring side of radical politics because they are unable to question deeper concepts.

One of the few characters to avoid becoming implicated in Social Unionism is Noel's love interest, Mrs Lace. While Mrs Lace lacks the restorative nostalgia that the other characters project, she does not escape critique from Mitford, who paints the party Mrs Lace hosts as just as bathetic as fascism. An "intellectually pretentious" bourgeois woman who has happened to marry well (21), Mrs Lace is continually looking to increase her cultural capital and symbolises what can emerge as a result of aristocratic decline. While she labels the cocktail party she holds as an opportunity to organise the logistics of the pageant play, in reality, it is "an excuse" for Mrs Lace to "show off [...] her newly-acquired friends and lover" to others (71). Mrs Lace consciously adopts a social front designed to impress both her existing country social circle and her new, more cosmopolitan friends: she chooses an explicitly modern mode of entertaining and alters her personal appearance by wearing "silver *lamé* cocktail-trousers and heavy makeup" (74). Disaster strikes, however, when her husband invites George Wilkins to attend: a man whom Mrs Lace thinks is "odious [...], stupid and loutish," and who will not fit in with the other guests (73). As such, the party is a failure for Mrs Lace: her new friends arrive "fearfully late" after a Union Jackshirt celebration runs over time, denying her the moment of social splendour she so desires (75). The party becomes "dreadful," "because nobody was behaving in the way she had planned": the different groups are not mixing, and her guests of honour are in "attitudes of extreme debility," worn out from their previous activities (75-76). But the greatest tragedy for Mrs Lace is when Noel, Jasper, Poppy, and Marjorie meet Mr Wilkins. Finding him to be great company because he tells dirty jokes, the group decide to give him the role of George

III in the pageant play, shattering Mrs Lace's dream of her and Noel being Queen Charlotte and the king. Mrs Lace's cocktail party reflects her desperation to be part of a social group that she perceives as being superior to her own: by throwing a sophisticated party, she hopes to be accepted into sophisticated society. But when the London group find friendship with the most unrefined guest at the party, Mrs Lace ends up further from her goal rather than closer to it.

The climax of the novel – and its main festivity – is a pageant play put on by the Union Jackshirts, and this is Mitford's most explicit attack on fascists who mask themselves behind a return to tradition. The popularisation of the pageant play in Britain during the Edwardian period is attributed to Louis Napoleon Parker (Hulme 270). The festive form, which typically presented several chronological acted-out episodes from the nation's history, frequently lingered on ideas of Merrie England and is widely regarded by scholars as an invented tradition (Esty 248; Hulme 270; Wallis 20). While the pageant play's popularity diminished during the First World War, a resurgence in the late 1920s made it "a familiar part of the British cultural landscape" (Hulme 271). As Joshua D. Esty notes, both the Edwardian original and interwar revival of the form sought to bring civic cohesion and promote nationalism (247). As "putative vessels of folk consciousness," pageant plays strongly embodied rural and traditional ideas of Englishness (246–47). The pageant play is thus able to conceal ideologies by masking them behind a façade of idealised history. In *Wigs on the Green*, Mitford manipulates this convention by placing fascism as the motivating ideology, but its representation within the play is anything but covert. Mitford's comic appropriation of the pageant play devalues fascism's attempts to use what Williams has described as the "well-known habit of using the past [...] as a stick to beat the present" to its advantage (*Country* 12). *Wigs on the Green's* pageant play presents fascism not as a serious political undertaking, but as a movement defined by clumsiness, bathos, and clowning, highlighting the failures of restorative nostalgia.

By setting the action in the village of Chalford, Mitford connects the aristocratic sympathies for fascism to the interwar yearning for a return to pastoral and traditional forms of Englishness. Mitford herself grew up in the country, and the rural setting of *Wigs on the Green* is central to a reading of the novel as a critique of fascism. The fictional village of Chalford is in the Cotswolds, an area which interwar rural texts frequently imagined as an idealised version of England (Brace 90–91). The image of a green and idyllic English rural landscape – which was central to ideas of national identity before and during the First World War – was under siege between the wars due to disorganised modernisation (Matless 25). Both the pageant play, with its emphasis on pastoral settings and social cohesion, and fascism, with its promise of logical (and traditional) order, offered a means to reverse this chaos.

Eugenia's grandmother, Lady Chalford, is the one to suggest putting on a pageant play in conjunction with a garden party to formally introduce Eugenia to local society. While Lady Chalford comments that pageants "are tremendously popular nowadays," her idea to hold one at the estate is more motivated by nostalgia than following the trends (43). Lady Chalford is "a relic from a forgotten age" who has shut herself away from society ever since her only son divorced his wife due to adultery (38). Stuck in a firmly Edwardian frame of mind and entirely unaware of how attitudes have relaxed since the war, Lady Chalford is convinced London society will never receive Eugenia because she is a "Child of Scandal" (39). After Lady Chalford relays these concerns to Poppy, Poppy suggests entertaining at the Chalford estate rather than London in order to combat the issue. Immediately, Lady Chalford reminisces about the entertainments of her youth, such as an "enchanted expedition" for a picnic, and "the theatricals at Christmas time" (42). As a form of pre-divorce entertainment (the war, as the narrator tells us, is not the defining reason for Lady Chalford's reclusiveness), the pageant play feeds into Lady Chalford's efforts to hold onto the past and its association with a pastoral, idyllic upbringing. The nature of the event

continually evolves as the novel progresses, and Eugenia's promotional posters eventually market the day as "a Grand Social Unionist Rally, Pageant, Garden Party and Olde Englyshe Fayre" (137). The fair, which involves "[m]aypole dances and art needlework stalls" (120), further reinforces the attempt to reproduce a product of the idealised past.

While Eugenia wants a pageant focused on the events in the recent history of fascism ("the March on Rome, the Death of Horst Wessel, the Burning of the Reichstag"), Noel wants one focused on a more well-known set of characters reflecting England's history: "Edward I, Florence Nightingale, Good Queen Bess" (46). As Mrs Lace comments, "[p]ageants [...] must be historical" (46). Stuck between a desire to promote political progress and commitment to a version of national history, the group finally compromises by choosing to re-enact George III and Queen Charlotte's visit to Chalford in the eighteenth century, with neighbouring village branches of Social Unionists to act out the various key moments of the couple's reign. While George III may initially appear an odd choice, his reign during the eighteenth century makes an appropriate period for a fascist pageant play. The period saw the Agricultural Revolution and a huge rise in rural populations, marking it as a time of prosperity for the countryside—a ready alignment with the Nazi ideals of *Volksgemeinschaft* and *Blut und Boden* that sought for a unified and hierarchical society with an innate connection to pastoral land. As Esty suggests, the pageant play collapsed complex histories into a "seductive continuity" of Englishness and tradition (249). The pageant play in *Wigs on the Green* illustrates attempts by the fascists to present their principles as an extension of English history. For instance, one episode of the play involves a messenger telling George III that Louis XVI of France "had been razored up by Marxist non-Aryans" (155).

Mitford uses George III to further undermine any chance of the reader taking the pageant play seriously. As Jasper tells Eugenia, the only thing that the "ordinary person" knows about George III is that "he went mad and lost America" (88). His madness thus deflates Eugenia's attempt to politicise him: the speech she so earnestly writes for the

character in the pageant becomes nothing but inane ramblings. In the speech, George III tells Chalford's subjects of a "prophetic dream" he had where Britain had become "the slush and slime of a decaying democracy," but that Social Unionism will overthrow this decline, leading to "the fulfilment of a Glorious Britain" (88). To attribute such a politically charged speech to a monarch popularly imagined to have mistaken a tree for the King of Prussia during one of his bouts of madness renders it devoid of its intended message.

The pageant ignores "historical truth to a degree unprecedented even in pageantry" (155), and indeed, its episodes are staged not as tragedy or triumph, but as bawdy comic relief. Nelson's wounding at the Battle of Santa Cruz de Tenerife presents itself as a circumstance of foolishness and distraction rather than heroism: his arm is "blown off" after having "his telescope pressed to his blind eye, and staring at Lady Hamilton with his other one" (152). The scene that follows is a jaunty musical number from the band, the popular song "Ship Ahoy! (All the Nice Girls Love a Sailor)," filled with lyrics such as "[w]ell, you know what sailors are / Bright and breezy, free and easy." Similarly, Nelson's final words before his death at the Battle of Trafalgar — a plea to look after Lady Hamilton — become a childish, rhyming entreaty: "[l]ook after pretty witty Emmie" (153). By transforming such historical moments into opportunities for laughter, the pageant play both further illustrates the weak commitments of the characters and undermines any serious political project the Social Unionists may have.

The pageant play culminates with chaos when a group of Pacifists crash the party dressed as the *sans-culottes* of the French Revolution, marking the fisticuffs that the novel's title alludes to. Given the full eighteenth-century costumes worn by the Social Unionists (including powdered wigs) and the pageant play's setting (a country estate), the meaning of the novel's title is literal: during the battle, there really are wigs on the green. There is also a verbal pun at play here, with "wigs" being a homophone for "Whigs." But the violence is presented as clumsy, and really, not that violent at all: the Pacifists' weapons are a

miscellaneous collection of pointless objects, ranging from the unsophisticated and unrefined (“potatoes stuffed with razor blades”) to the downright antithetical (“life preservers” [157]). Yet these weapons prove to be effective against the Social Unionists, as their elaborate costumes leave them comically vulnerable. We are told “atrocities too horrible to name” take place during the battle and that hardly any Social Unionists escape injury (157). However, the sheer ludicrousness of the scene through its presentation of “[i]mages so wonderfully low and unaccountable,” as Pope would describe it (180), renders it bathetic. There is little sense any of the injuries are grave, and when the Social Unionists are eventually victorious, they punish the captured Pacifists by forcing them to consume “enormous doses” of laxatives (159). Mitford recasts fascist paramilitary violence as being merely uncomfortable and purgative, rather than deadly. By politicising (and subsequently ridiculing) the pageant play, Mitford calls attention to how fascism hijacks tradition to project its ideologies.

After the Social Unionist victory at the pageant play battle, the plot resolves with two romantic pairings: Poppy and Jasper, who plan to marry after Poppy divorces her husband, and Marjorie and Mr Wilkins. In giving the reader these pairings, Mitford follows the expected marriage plot, but the novel’s ending is by no means a satisfying resolution. As Barreca argues, the endings of works by women writers of comedy are frequently subversive: they either fail to replicate the hierarchies expected of them, or if they do replicate these hierarchies, “there is often an attendant sense of dislocation” (24). Barreca points to the marriage plot in Austen’s *Mansfield Park* as exemplary of this trend. While *Mansfield Park* provides the requisite happy ending with the union of Fanny and Edmund, Austen writes it in an entirely cursory manner to indicate her weak commitment to the conventions that regulate her chosen form (24).

Wigs on the Green presents a similar ending to *Mansfield Park*. Unlike Gibbons, whose endings resolve in satisfying happily-ever-afters (the mess tidied up in *Cold Comfort Farm*,

the social opprobrium overcome in *Bassett*, the Cinderella narrative of *Nightingale Wood*), Mitford's conclusion to *Wigs on the Green* is deliberately ambiguous. The novel resolves in marriage, but Mitford denies her reader a strong or positive attachment to her characters, or indeed any real sense of these relationships being genuine romantic connections. The novel continually presents the central characters (excepting Eugenia) as insincere and flighty, willing to accept anything providing it benefits them; it is difficult to believe these characteristics have suddenly evaporated or changed by the novel's conclusion. Throughout the novel we are given the comedy, but not the romance: Marjorie's courtship of Mr Wilkins largely takes place off the page, and Poppy eventually acquiesces to Jasper's pleas for them to marry on the basis that "[i]t would seem a bit wasteful not to keep you about the place" (161). The novel's structure further suggests Mitford's resistance to providing a satisfying ending. After the pageant play battle, the novel's final chapter jumps forward several months to another party, Marjorie and Mr Wilkins's wedding reception in London, only to gloss over it quickly. Moreover, given the sheer number of potential pairings the novel presents – Noel and Jasper spend copious amounts of time debating whether they should be chasing Eugenia, Poppy, Marjorie, or Mrs Lace – the romantic connections seem tenuous at best. There is little confidence that Marjorie and Mr Wilkins's marriage will last: at the wedding, Marjorie's mother resigns herself to the coupling, consoling herself that "[p]oor Mr Wilkins [...] doesn't want to marry her in the least" and that "divorce is such an easy matter in these days" (167). As Allan Hepburn has noted, love and marriage are not the same in Mitford's novels, as the former is not a requirement for the latter to take place (340). Marriage in *Wigs in the Green* is a necessity due to its genre, but its sincerity and longevity are questionable.

By the conclusion of the novel, there is little sense that any of the characters have changed for the better, and Social Unionism still reigns over the aristocracy: "ringing cheers" meet Eugenia's heavily politicised speech at the reception, and the guests sing the Union

Jackshirts' anthem as a tribute to the couple (169). For Suh, Mitford's critique of fascism is "deeply ambiguous" due to the novel's combination of both "satire and elegy" (134–35). But by providing a mere perfunctory gesture towards the narrative conclusion that governs its form, the novel's ending serves to reinforce Mitford's anti-fascist project. In creating an ending where the reader is neither attached to the characters nor invested in the romantic relationships between them, Mitford deliberately transfigures what should be a satisfying resolution into a thoroughly unsatisfying one. The novel ends exactly how it begins. Noel is back working in a bank, repeating the same words spoken on the first page: "[n]o, I'm sorry, [...] not sufficiently attractive" (170). With its characters trapped in a loop without room for growth or progress, the novel's ending feels resolutely bleak, even with its (supposedly) celebratory tone. Mitford's weak commitment to the conventions of her chosen mode produces anxiety, creating the unsettling ending to the novel. Rather than bringing restorative relief, Mitford presents uneasiness and uncertainty, a dystopian vista where radicalism blindly consumes the aristocracy.

While many of the jokes in Mitford's interwar novels come from the differences between generations, these texts do not seek to endorse one side's views over the other. Instead, Mitford's target is the aristocracy as a whole, for using festivity as an attempt to retrench the structures that support their status. As these novels repeatedly demonstrate, the speciality festive occasions the aristocracy engage with are devoid of their intended celebratory *jouissance*. The absence of festive joy, Mitford suggests, is due to these events lacking histories of their own. By exposing the inventedness of the shooting party, Christmas, and the pageant play, Mitford dismantles the concept of tradition entirely, calling into question the legitimacy of using such events to advance notions of Englishness and nationalism.

Pope describes the sinking artist as one who "mingle[s] Bits of the most various, or discordant kinds, Landscape, History, Portraits, Animals, and connect[s] them with a great

deal of *Flourishing*" (176). While Mitford's deployment of bathos is a highly conscious one — as opposed to the accidental acts Pope describes — her novels indeed bring a variety of contrasting images together. In casting the Highland landscape as anything but sublime, the Merrie English countryside as dull and unsatisfying, and fascist politics as sheer clowning, Mitford's bathos illuminates the fallacy of restorative nostalgia. In *Highland Fling*, Mitford continually undercuts the aristocratic engagement with the shooting party by figuring it as an event causing disappointment and discord; in *Christmas Pudding*, the drab festive experience at Christmas highlights how restorative nostalgia's idealisation of the Victorian past generates only adverse affects. *Wigs on the Green* emphasises the potential dangers of restorative nostalgia, with its pageant play demonstrating the aristocracy's willingness to engage even with radical politics in an attempt to uphold their status. Mitford — herself a member of the aristocracy — shows that her characters take up these manufactured festive forms in an attempt to align with tradition, when in fact they are devoid of any tradition at all. This impulse to expose inconsistency is also at play in Benson's Mapp and Lucia series, where deliberate and transparent performances rule the festive experiences of its characters. Like Mitford, Benson critiques the use of parties as an opportunity for advancing status, evincing a notable interwar concern with the uses and abuses of festivity.

Chapter 6

“This Petty, Scheming World”: Entertainment, Performance, and Seriality in E. F. Benson

In his memoir, *Final Edition: Informal Autobiography* (1940), E. F. Benson recalls a crisis point in the 1920s when he began to have “considerable misgivings” about his literary career (181). While his books “continued to sell in satisfactory numbers,” Benson realised he “had long ago reached the point at which [...] I had come to the end of anything worth saying” (182). Rereading his past work, Benson felt he had fallen guilty of sentimentality, something he “despised [...] in other writers”: “I looked upon it as a deliberate fake yet whenever I got in a difficulty I used it unblushingly myself” (182). This, he writes, left him vulnerable to “losing any claim to be called a serious novelist” (183). Born in 1867, Benson felt that his brand and style of writing was struggling to keep up with the new direction of modern fiction.

The 1920s, though, also marked the beginning of the novel series Benson is most remembered for today: the six-part Mapp and Lucia series, starting with the publication of *Queen Lucia* in 1920. Interestingly, Benson observes that this period of intense self-reflection did not “prevent me from pursuing my frivolous way with the preposterous adventures of Lucia and Miss Mapp” as “there was nothing faked or sentimental” about the series (184). “I was not offering them as examples of serious fiction,” he writes (184). This chapter argues Benson instead explicitly offers the Mapp and Lucia novels as entertainment and that in doing so, he broadcasts the value of the serial and the popular. At the same time, through the repetition inherent to serial texts, he offers a critique of performances of sociability at parties. Benson mocks those who attempt to know, have, and capture everything: whether that be the bourgeois aspirants in his novels, or his fellow writers, who sought to encapsulate totality and enormity in their fiction.

Benson's series comically chronicles rural village life. For his characters, life is governed by social and cultural one-upmanship, leading to plenty of gossip, bitchery, and scheming. In the first three novels in the series – *Queen Lucia*, *Miss Mapp* (1922), and *Lucia in London* (1927) – this plays out in two different locations, with two separate casts of characters. *Queen Lucia* and *Lucia in London* focus on Emmeline Lucas (affectionately nicknamed "Lucia"), her social nemesis Daisy Quantock, and the village of Riseholme; *Miss Mapp* centres on Elizabeth Mapp, her rival Diva Plaistow, and the village of Tilling. This chapter, however, examines the final three novels: *Mapp and Lucia* (1931), *Lucia's Progress* (1935), and *Trouble for Lucia* (1939). My focus is on these novels as *Mapp and Lucia* marks the moment when Lucia and Elizabeth come face to face, establishing the battle for social dominance that the series is most remembered for today. *Mapp and Lucia* follows the recently widowed Lucia, who has tired of her once beloved village of Riseholme and decides to rent a house in Tilling for the summer, along with her best friend, Georgie Pillson. In Tilling, she encounters Elizabeth, the current ruler supreme over the village. This begins a catty battle between the pair, each seeking to be the leader of Tilling society. Central to this tussle is Elizabeth's desire to obtain Lucia's recipe for *Lobster à la Riseholme*, a delicious and coveted dish frequently served at Lucia's dinner parties. In *Lucia's Progress*, Lucia resolves to remarry and settles in a platonic marriage with Georgie. Continuing to exert her new influence over Tilling, throughout the novel she gets the entire village hooked on stocks trading, runs for the local council, and undertakes an archaeological dig in her backyard in a bid to find international fame. In the final novel, *Trouble for Lucia*, Lucia reaches the peak of her powers when she becomes the mayor of Tilling. Hiring Elizabeth as her mayoress as a way of placating her, Lucia attempts to enforce rule over Tilling's citizens in a way that irritates many. Moreover, Lucia's habit of being flexible with the truth catches up with her when no one believes that she entertained a high society duchess at a private dinner party.

As these rather lengthy descriptions show, the Mapp and Lucia novels are heavily plot-focused: there are frequent twists, turns, and complications. But while the texts in the series can be read out of order or as standalone novels, much of their readerly pleasure comes from the standard structure that is repeated across the texts, creating a web of overlaying social skirmishes that build upon each other. Benson himself saw the series as “a Saga indefinitely unveiling itself” (*Final Edition* 163). As Glen Cavaliero argues, much of Benson’s comic force comes from the continual redeployment of the same jokes, meaning the reader is left “laughing at his own laughter at such shameless jerking of the strings” (34). Each novel in the series opens with the lead-up to a large social event – such as the mayoral banquet in *Trouble for Lucia* – before the first major social schism between Lucia and Elizabeth occurs (or, in the case of the first three novels, between Lucia and Daisy, and Elizabeth and Diva). A series of tussles ensues, with the village oscillating between peace and war, played out over a course of private parties in the characters’ homes. In this sense, parties themselves become a serial affair in Tilling, bound to be repeated across the course of the series. The climax of the novel is usually the largest social scuffle of them all and suspends or stifles entertaining in the village. The novels end with this conflict resolved, but not without Lucia and Elizabeth taking one final jab at each other.

The series’ characters further compound the formulaic nature of Benson’s plots. Each of the central characters has particular quirks which become recognisable throughout the series. Benson’s characters are all individual yet come to be entirely predictable: there are no surprises when Georgie makes mention of polishing his bibelots or when the local priest speaks in a broad Scottish accent despite hailing from Birmingham. For Umberto Eco, writing about detective fiction, this sort of repetition is central to the serial form. Each text in a series is the same but different: while the author must devise new secondary characters or action to frame the plot around, “these details only serve to reconfirm the permanence of a fixed repertoire of *topoi*” (164). As Bede Scott argues, this tension between “stereotype and

innovation” in the series is what generates reader interest: “[w]ith what unpredictability, we ask ourselves, will [the author] be able to achieve the predictable?” (107–08). When reading one of the Mapp and Lucia novels, the reader will expect to find two women battling for social dominance, but they do not know what circumstances are driving the battle in each instance. Seriality, its inherent repetition, and the pleasure it produces, are central to Benson’s novels and must be taken into account when reading these texts.

The repetition across the series has direct implications for its representation of performance. Benson’s characters are always deliberate yet transparent in their actions, scheming and plotting new ways to usurp each other in their bid to for social capital. As Cavaliero notes, Benson’s comic techniques are “anything but subtle” (34). Parties become sites of performance, where aspects of the party are produced and presented by both host and guest alike to advance their social standing. In particular, two elements come to the fore in the Mapp and Lucia novels as tools for performance: food and music. In these novels, their standard, repetitious structure mean the same performances are enacted time and time again, often without generating any permanent result. As Laurie Langbauer argues, “[t]he formal properties of the series represent a cycle of perpetuation and revitalization of the status quo”: while it may seem progress is being made, nothing really changes from one instalment to the next (12). The characters’ continued ridiculous attempts at modern novelty and innovation supply the entertainment of the series.

This chapter begins by unpacking the function of the serial form of the Mapp and Lucia novels, relating this seriality to Benson’s interwar commentaries on fiction, modernity, and sociability. It then moves to a discussion of the piano as an object for performance, not just through how it is played, but also in how it functions as a surface for other things to be placed. Finally, the chapter considers food as a performance, and how this oscillates between excess and restraint, luxuriousness and plainness. Through these readings, I argue that Benson’s series is entertainment *about* entertainment. Entertaining in the home – luncheons,

afternoon teas, bridge evenings, dinner parties – forms the very basis of Tilling society and becomes the chief source of entertainment for the reader.

Benson, Modern Fiction, and the Series

As a “twentieth century Victorian” writing and publishing on both sides of the *fin de siècle* (Oulton 385), Benson is a fascinating case study. With his Victorian vantage point, he offers the potential for a very different take on the interwar period, especially when compared to the other writers already examined in this thesis. The Mapp and Lucia novels were written relatively late in his career and only came to an end with his death in 1940 at the age of seventy-two. In comparing the Mapp and Lucia series to the other interwar novels studied here, there are some stark differences: its protagonists are older, indeed middle-aged; its setting is rural and restricted; and the forms of sociability it presents are decidedly more traditional. While Waugh darkly laments the decay of hospitable sociability, Mitford presents aristocratic forms of sociability as being at risk, and Gibbons celebrates the opportunities modernity brings for social mobility, Benson largely excludes signifiers of modernity to amplify his critique of party performances.

Benson was a prolific writer, publishing close to a hundred novels, short story collections, and nonfiction works over the course of his six-decade career. He wrote a number of ghost stories, social commentaries, and several biographies, but he is today most well known for his social satires. His first novel, *Dodo: A Detail of the Day* (1893), a satire of young high society in the naughty nineties was an instant success. In 1918, he began to spend time in the village of Rye in Sussex, renting Lamb House, the former home of Henry James. He eventually settled there permanently. Here, he found the inspiration for the Mapp and Lucia series, modelling the village of Tilling on Rye and basing Elizabeth’s residence, Mallards, on Lamb House. The series became his most successful and popular work: so

much so that the 1932 Ideal Home Exhibition even included a garden inspired by Lucia's "Perdita's Garden" from her home in Riseholme ("Triumphs" 594). But despite his huge output and popularity during his lifetime, little scholarly research has been dedicated to Benson. The Mapp and Lucia series has been mentioned in passing by numerous scholars but is rarely taken up as a central focus. Scholars who have considered Benson at length include Rachel R. Mather, who positions the Mapp and Lucia series as a comedy of manners, and Robert F. Kiernan, who argues that the novels are examples of camp. Humble, in her work on the middlebrow, has also pointed to the camp qualities of Benson's work (see *Feminine Middlebrow Novel*; "Queer Pleasures"). Two biographies of Benson have been published: one in 1988 by Geoffrey Palmer and Noel Lloyd, and another in 1991 by Brian Masters. Outside of literary studies, Benson's family has been the subject of several historical studies.¹ Benson does, however, have a small yet dedicated following today through groups such as the E. F. Benson Society and the Friends of Tilling, and the series has twice been adapted for television in 1985 and 2014.

As the scholarship shows, Benson's interwar popularity has, for the most part, failed to carry through to academic circles. While the Mapp and Lucia novels were his most successful works, their seriality often denies them the opportunity for academic study. As Suzanne Keen argues, the critical neglect of the novel series as a form can be attributed to its strong associations with genre fiction and its diversity in content, which "repel[s] efforts at generalization" (725–26). Indeed, the novel series was by no means a dying form during the

¹ See, for instance: Bolt; Goldhill; Tosh. Benson was the second youngest of six siblings. His father was the Archbishop of Canterbury, a position which brought the family into social prestige. A number of Benson's siblings suffered from mental health issues, and all of them, as well as Benson himself and his mother, are speculated to have been queer. Benson's mother has been a particular figure of interest for scholars, as she set up a household with a woman following her husband's death.

early twentieth century, encompassing both modernist works (Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage*, Ford Madox Ford's *Parade's End*) and popular novels (John Galsworthy's *The Forsyte Saga*, the detective fiction of Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers, Sax Rohmer's *Fu Manchu*). The Mapp and Lucia novels themselves align with several other series written in the style of a comedy of manners, such as Delafield's *Provincial Lady*, Angela Thirkell's *Barsetshire* novels, and Wodehouse's *Bertie and Jeeves*. As Matthew Levay suggests, while the novel series in the early twentieth century often invoked associations with Victorian forms of seriality, such as the three-volume novel and the serialisation of novels in periodicals (551), it is "a significant site of twentieth-century fiction's aesthetic development" (546). This reading aligns with broader work on seriality: Frank Kelleter ties the emergence of seriality to that of modernity, arguing that seriality has been "the distinguishing mark of virtually all forms of capitalist entertainment" since the mid nineteenth century (30). The series in the early twentieth century, Levay argues, is "a quietly innovative literary form" and deserves more critical attention because it shows the complexity and diversity of experimentalism in the period (546, 559).

This period also saw the emergence of popular fiction in the form we recognise it today. As David Carter argues, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries brought a "newly determining presence within mainstream publishing of generic divisions driven by popular fiction" (352). Larger print runs, cheaper editions, and the expansion of lending library services such as the Boots Booklovers' Library made books more accessible to a broader audience. Aided by this mass reading public, the golden age of crime fiction cemented many of the conventions of the genre, while the success of Georgette Heyer and the dominance of Mills and Boon titles in the 1930s were testaments to the growing popularity of the romance genre. For Ken Gelder, popular fiction is identified not by its creativity but by its industry (15). Popular writers tend towards prolific outputs and serialisation, meaning "[p]roduction, output, deadlines, sequels, [and] work" are "some of

the foregrounded logics and practices” of popular fiction (17). While Benson did not stick to one genre during his career – he dabbled in fantasy, supernatural horror, and romantic melodrama – the span of his bibliography demonstrates his industriousness. Of his writing career, he wrote that “[t]he whole thing is a matter of business, *not* sentiment really [...]. I hate the oily rot about publishers being lovers of literature!!!” (qtd. in Masters 265).

Regardless of whether he is literary or popular, Benson is also maligned by literary studies’ dominant systems of periodisation. Writers like Benson – born long before the twentieth century but writing well into it – are stuck in what Franco Moretti calls “the slaughterhouse of literature” (207), and often left out of accounts of modernism and other narratives of twentieth-century literary history. But these writers complicate the notion of there being an abrupt divide or rupture between Victorian and modernist writing. Jessica R. Feldman has proposed the term “Victorian Modernism” as a way to recast the two periods as one, but she defines this extension in relation to high modernism (3–6). Benson, as a popular writer decidedly outside elite and avant-garde forms, does not sit comfortably within Feldman’s framework. Instead, an approach that recognises and interrogates both discontinuities and continuities between the Victorian and modernist periods provides useful means for reading writers like Benson. Anne-Florence Gillard-Estrada and Anne Besnault-Levita have illustrated how the concern with the new was not as totalising in modernism as it was first claimed, meaning the ideas of rupture and trauma so often attributed to the movement are not universal (2). They argue against placing Victorian and modernist writers and texts into generalised “period concepts,” instead suggesting an approach that “historicize[s] and individualize[s],” in order to reveal “multiple cultural contexts and networks of discourse” (8). Any reading of Benson’s works, then, needs to be attuned to the specific contexts relevant to their production. Benson’s novels possess what Light describes as “conservative modernity,” which is “a conservatism itself in revolt against the past, trying to make room for the present” (10–11). When reading his interwar social

commentaries alongside the Mapp and Lucia novels, it is evident that while Benson is certainly no champion of modernity, he does not wholeheartedly embrace his Victorian past either.

These commentaries—in particular, *As We Are: A Modern Revue* (1932), and *Final Edition*—make Benson's dissatisfaction with the state of fiction clear. Benson presents a reasonably dim view of contemporary fiction, as *As We Are's* penultimate chapter, "Grub Street," suggests. But in a reversal of the term's traditional usage, the occupants of Benson's Grub Street are not literary hacks but predominately literary modernists. According to Benson, after the First World War, "critics and readers waited for the appearance of some fresh mode" (254). While "[t]here were many competent novelists and story-tellers of an older day still at work," they were not expected to "refashion their minds to newer forms" of expression (254). The first writer to bring an "entirely fresh method," Benson writes, was Joyce, closely followed by Woolf (254–55). But Benson challenges whether their method—stream of consciousness—was ever fresh at all, claiming that James "was the first great writer of fiction" to "deliberately and intentionally" use the stream of consciousness (258). Moreover, he boldly asserts, James's application of the technique was better than Joyce's or Woolf's because he "employed that economy which distinguishes the great artist" (260). Unlike *Ulysses* or *Mrs Dalloway*, James's novels contain "no collateral excursions," reflecting only what it is "immediately concerned with" (260). Benson's friendship with James is almost certainly playing into his evaluations here. Nonetheless, his issue with the high modernists is not their choice of technique, but how this technique is pushed to its limits to take these sorts of collateral excursions which would come to define high modernism. According to Benson, "Dallowayism [...] achieves the spectacle of an elephant not picking up a pin" ("Two Types" 426), and the modernists' stream of consciousness is "nothing more than skimming off the scum that is continually rising to the surface of the brain" (424). For Benson, elegant prose is defined by having clarity in its purpose, making no diversions

along the way. Of course, the Mapp and Lucia series bears no real resemblance in its form to the late Jamesian tendency towards lengthy and cluttered paragraphs and sentences, nor does it rely on the stream of consciousness.² But in its style, it has an ethos of economy that sets it apart from Joyce or Woolf. It follows a strict linearity and temporality: no flashbacks or flashforwards are to be found, nor is time radically manipulated. Its prose is clear, its paragraphs short, and there is a balance between dialogue and description. Benson's narratives, like Gibbons's, are constructed in a way that ensures audience appeal. At every level, Benson's series is eminently accessible, allowing its readers to be easily entertained.

In *As We Are*, Benson also expresses concern about modern fiction's frankness about sex, describing the number of new novels concerned with the topic as a "flood" and "epidemic" (261). While he acknowledges that sex has always been of interest in fiction – "novelists and playwrights will continue to dip into that ever-bubbling stock-pot to furnish the basis for their soup" – he critiques modern writing's propensity to treat it with such "frankness and wealth of physical detail" (261). He later commends Compton Mackenzie's *Extraordinary Women* (1928) and Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), putting them forward as examples of modern fiction that have dealt with the topic sensitively (264). Extending the soup metaphor, Benson claims that as a whole modern authors are "serving up the stock-pot without other ingredients and flavourings," covered with "a layer of rancid fat" and of "the most tepid temperature" (261). In order to avoid presenting such tasteless (or indeed, disgusting) soup, Benson elects to leave sex out of the series almost entirely. The two marriages that occur in the series – Lucia and Georgie, and Elizabeth and Major Benjy –

² In his commentary on the Victorian era, *As We Were: A Victorian Peep-Show* (1930), Benson confesses to finding James's "later methods dim and nebulous," preferring the "crystal clearness" and "beautiful direct simplicity" of James's earlier works (324), further emphasising his valuing of lucid prose.

are both marriages of convenience. Lucia and Georgie's union is explicitly defined as platonic, and it is strongly suggested throughout the series that Georgie is queer.³ The terms of their marriage are determined by Lucia's veiled statement that "I trust that you'll be very comfortable in the oak bedroom [...] and all that implies," and while Georgie briefly considers "kissing Lucia once, on the brow," he decides not to in fear "she might consider it a minor species of rape" (454). The only explicit reference to the word is in *Mapp and Lucia*, and even then, it is not framed in favourable terms: Lucia describes it as "that horrible thing which Freud calls sex" (86). By referring to Freud, Benson explicitly aligns sex with modernity, an association that speaks to his disdain for modern fiction's overt interest in the topic. This is confirmed when Lucia – ever the aspirant towards modernity and intellectual capital (but always two or three steps behind the true avant-garde) – admits to having never read Freud but thinks she "must read some" (86).

However, Benson's critique of fiction in *As We Are* extends beyond the work of the modernists, demonstrated through his evident contempt for Arnold Bennett. While Bennett was of Benson's generation (they were even born in the same year), Benson reserves little kindness towards his work. Much of his criticism is directed towards *Imperial Palace* (1930), Bennett's final and longest novel. Benson argues there is a "delusion that there is something big in mere length," and as such, epic narratives "now litter the fields of fiction" (276–77). While Benson praises Bennett's earlier but similarly lengthy *The Old Wives' Tale* (1908), he describes *Imperial Palace* as "a balloon-book, dismally collapsing when the gas is let out" and suggests its topic – the day-to-day minutiae of a large hotel – does not make for a particularly exciting novel (277). He likens the writer of long novels to an "architect" who continually "adds fresh floors to his monstrous erection" to the point where "the whole

³ As Humble argues, Georgie is "barely closeted" ("Queer Pleasures" 220); he is fond of collecting bibelots, enjoys embroidery, and regularly makes ostentatious sartorial choices.

crazy structure collapses” and the fatigued reader is forced to “[drag] himself dustily from out the débris” (276). As Benson’s lambasting of Bennett shows, while he may have felt out of step with the direction of modernist fiction, he found plenty to dislike in the type of work often conceived as its antithesis.

In *Final Edition*, Benson’s examination of modern fiction primarily targets high modernism. This time, he takes issue with its style, which he frames in language associated with music: modern writers “had acquired lucidity by a blank disregard of euphony: they were full of jerks” (245). Modern fiction, for Benson, is “monotonous [...] lacking in wide prospects and far horizons” (249). His final take on the modernists is bleak, describing them as “bloodless voluptuaries” who get “little fun out of their amusement” (249–50). In “Two Types of Modern Fiction,” an essay published in the *London Mercury* in 1928, Benson claims a key characteristic of modern fiction is “the complete absence of joy”: there is a “certain lust for nakedness” that results in modern writers “shew[ing] us flayed humanity, like carcasses in butchers’ shop, and (accidentally) as dead as sirloins or sausages” (418). For Benson, the act of writing should fundamentally be a pleasurable task, even if the content is serious. His claims did not escape attention: after reading *Final Edition* in 1940, Woolf noted in her diary that she thought the book was an attempt by Benson to “rasp himself clean of his barnacles” (*Diary* 5: 334). In doing so, Woolf places Benson firmly in the camp of Bennett, Galsworthy, and H. G. Wells, whom she lambasts in “Modern Fiction” (1921). Benson is akin to a decrepit ship, attempting to remove what has already stuck and cannot be shaken. According to Woolf’s critique, Benson’s work (whether *Final Edition* or his fiction) is not innovative enough, nor does it cut to the core of the human experience in the way that Woolf herself championed.

But this comforting insularity and safety, both in terms of form and content, is very much the point of Benson’s Mapp and Lucia series. Benson’s language in his critiques of fiction is provocative: authors serve up lukewarm soup and gain no real joy from their work,

leaving the reader to wearily consume lacklustre texts. No matter what period or type of fiction he berates, Benson is interested in entertainment: that the processes of both writing and reading texts should be enjoyable. This interest in pleasure is also evident in the subtitles of his two 1930s social commentaries: *As We Are's* subtitle is *A Modern Revue*, while *As We Were* is subtitled *A Victorian Peep-Show*. For Carolyn W. de la L. Oulton, the title *As We Were* evidences Benson's complex relationship with past and present: "'peepshow' gestures to both a populist visual tradition [...] and the assumed voyeurism to which this appeals," and "we" "allies Benson with the generation he is describing" but is complicated by "were," which "reminds readers that he also has a foot in the twentieth century camp" (393). In explicitly labelling these texts as "peepshows" and "revues," Benson invites them to be seen by their readers as spectacles.

Likewise, the publishers of the Mapp and Lucia novels cement the series' branding as popular entertainment. Hutchinson published the first three books in the series; Hodder and Stoughton published the final three. Both publishers were known for producing large amounts of popular genre fiction. In 1926 alone, 211 new titles were published by Hutchinson and its imprint, Hurst and Blackett (Harris 165). Authors on Hutchinson's list included prolific popular writers such as Ursula Bloom, Richmal Crompton, and Ethel Mannin (165–66). Taglines on Hutchinson's advertisements in the *Times* designated the publisher's books as the "[b]est & cheapest form of entertainment," explicitly aligning the brand with leisurely reading ("Hutchinson's Novels" 9). Hodder and Stoughton, meanwhile, were most well-known in the interwar years for their "yellow jacket" novels, which were priced at two shillings (Collin 147). Their fiction list predominately featured popular genres (147). The 1938 edition of *The Authors Playwrights and Composers Handbook* describes Hutchinson as producing "an enormous output of popular fiction" (Roberts 23), while "the present tendency" of Hodder and Stoughton acquisitions is "uplift and clean entertainment" (22). The marketing for the Mapp and Lucia series also emphasised its

popular appeal: Hutchinson drew upon a review from the *Spectator* which pronounced *Lucia in London* as “highly entertaining” in its advertising of the novel (“Latest Novels” 9); Hodder and Stoughton labelled *Lucia’s Progress* as one of their “holiday novels” (“Hodder & Stoughton” 8), telling the reader “[i]t will be your pleasure to meet again Lucia and Elizabeth Mapp” (“This” 8). Reviews promoted a similar message. A review of *Queen Lucia* in the *Times Literary Supplement* described it as “altogether satisfying entertainment” (Champneys 502); another, reviewing *Mapp and Lucia*, thought “Benson is obviously enjoying himself with this light-hearted frolic” (Straus, “New Fiction” 8). Benson’s series was positioned and understood as entertainment in the interwar market.

The entertaining and comic qualities of the Mapp and Lucia series are partially realised through a combination of scale and repetition, both of which have a direct impact on the series’ representation of performance. Robert L. Caserio suggests scale is at the core of Benson’s comedy: “to make us realize, and yet simultaneously to disregard, the smallness of the scale” (199). Scale is also central to the form of the novel series more broadly. For Langbauer, the novel series is subject to a paradox where “in seeming in its expansiveness to enclose *so much*, it exposes that totality as only an illusion” (14). Benson himself recognised the centrality of scale to his work: as he recalls in *Final Edition*, his initial vision for Mapp and Lucia was that “it would all be small beer, but one could get a head upon it of jealousies and malignities and devouring inquisitiveness” (163). The series’ restricted setting is essential to this idea of scale. The action begins in Riseholme in *Queen Lucia*, moves to Tilling in *Miss Mapp*, briefly flirts with the country’s capital in *Lucia in London*, before centring permanently on Tilling for the final three novels. The cast of characters, too, is relatively small. While some 1200 people vote in the Tilling council elections in *Lucia’s Progress*, the reader only really knows ten of its inhabitants well: Lucia, Georgie, Elizabeth, Major Benjy, Diva, Quaint Irene, Algernon and Susan Wyse, and the Padre and his wife Evie. Other familiar names do appear at times – such as Isabel Poppit, Susan’s daughter, and the

cosmopolitan opera singer Olga Bracely – but they are only brought in to play minor roles in the advancement of plot. Servants and shopkeepers are only ever mentioned in passing: while we know Lucia’s housekeeper Grosvenor, her chauffeur Cadman, and Georgie’s maid Foljambe by name, we never get much sense of their personalities. Benson’s world, then, is also one restricted by class, but this functions to illuminate the pretensions of his characters. While the characters are certainly at the top of Tilling’s small village society, they are all only upper middle class at best. Indeed, they carry little capital in high society, as *Lucia in London* acutely demonstrates through Lucia’s disastrous attempts to become a metropolitan socialite.

Scott, writing about Wodehouse, suggests Wodehouse’s own ahistoric quasi-Edwardian setting means “his aesthetic values (linearity, readability, legibility) can be protected from the formal and ‘thematic’ incursions of modernity” (B. Scott 112). While Benson’s manipulation of temporality is not at the same level as Wodehouse’s (the eleven Jeeves novels were published over the course of forty years), I want to suggest something similar is happening in the Mapp and Lucia novels. Tilling is, as a whole, a spatiotemporal setting “deprived of historical density and verisimilitude” (B. Scott 110). While passing mentions of Mussolini, “that huge horrid book by Mr. James Joyce” (*Complete 2*: 607), and the BBC make it clear the novels are set in the present (albeit a utopian one where the effects of war are barely felt), its forms of sociability are more in alignment with the Victorian era. But these fleeting references to the modern are integral to Benson’s critique. By deliberately screening modern life from the village of Tilling – yet hinting at modernity’s existence beyond its confines – Benson makes his characters’ bids for social and cultural capital all the more obvious. While Benson’s characters aspire towards modern refinement, they are overtly out of step with the real trends in contemporary life, lending the series much of its readerly pleasure. The entertaining aspect of Tilling’s backwardness would have been

amplified even more strongly for interwar audiences, who would have been acutely aware that Tilling was behind the times.

A brief reading of the series' forms of sociability makes clear that traditional forms are favoured over modern ones. Entertaining is always organised in advance, never spontaneous, and takes place in clearly delineated periods. The characters' orientation towards tradition is indicated through material, spatial, and social cues. Subverting these conventions leaves characters confused: for instance, when Elizabeth unexpectedly calls in at Georgie's home, his first thought is "[w]hat can she want? It's too late for lunch and too early for tea" (338). Dinner parties regularly follow the traditional formality of separating ladies and gentlemen into separate rooms after the meal, and at a dinner party hosted by Lucia and Georgie in *Trouble for Lucia*, Georgie places menu cards at each plate setting (493). Mr Wyse, the series' emblem of decorum, upholds "turning" at the dinner table: "when Lucia tried to produce general talk and spoke to Georgie, he instantly turned his head to the right, and talked most politely to his wife [...] till Lucia was ready for him again" (114). The bridge parties held in Tilling during winter follow a "fixed and invariable" pattern, where tea is served before three hours of bridge (215). When the party breaks up in the evening, all the guests claim to be going home to dress for dinner, when they are merely going home to have nothing more than a tray (that is, a light snack) which does not require dinner dress at all. This "dress-and-dinner fiction" is exemplary of the Victorian fronts the characters embody at festivities (215).

Tilling's festivities are most frequently traditional in form: dinner parties, garden parties, and afternoon teas. In particular, afternoon tea – a form of entertaining that was being increasingly usurped by the growing popularity of the cocktail party during the 1920s and 1930s – is a primary festive event in Tilling. An article from *Vogue* in 1933 laments the afternoon tea's decline in popularity: "[t]ea-parties have fallen sadly into disfavour these past few years, unceremoniously elbowed into the background by the overbearing cocktail

party" ("Committee" 78). But cocktails, as material objects decidedly emblematic of modernity (as already shown in Chapter 1) are rarely mentioned or consumed in the novels. Only three characters are shown to drink cocktails: Quaint Irene, Olga, and Major Benjy, who given his fondness of drink, presumably consumes them for their alcoholic content rather than any aspirations to look chic. The afternoon tea – which *Vogue* describes as a "peculiarly English habit" (78) – is decidedly more formal and traditional. But while tradition is the status quo in Tilling, modern forms of festivity exist outside the village. In *Trouble for Lucia*, for instance, Lucia learns the new residents of her former home in Riseholme "have lovely mixed bathing parties" and "cocktail parties," and has "a pang of regret that she had never thought of doing that" (*Complete* 2: 595). The peripheral inclusion of modern elements in the series are often found in places beyond Tilling, or in external visitors to the village, a move which highlights Tilling's conservatism.

Benson's turn to social commentary in the interwar years suggests he was well aware of how social life had transformed between the two centuries. His adaption of traditional modes of sociability in the series, then, should not be read as the product of a writer out of step with the times. As Masters argues in relation to *As We Are*, Benson "knows he is a fossil from a distant era, and does not mind" (277). While Benson embraces his conservatism as part of his identity, in Mapp and Lucia he critiques those who attempt to mask their own fossilised status. Scale and repetition are central to creating this critique, generating a narrative that deliberately points to its constructed nature and fictionality. For Scott, the "heightened narratorial awareness of the 'already-written'" in the novel series can lead to a certain self-reflexivity, where "the characters themselves are sometimes obliged to recognize the formulaic nature of the narrative they occupy" (B. Scott 105). This bubbles to the surface most prominently in *Trouble for Lucia*, where a sudden outburst from a character exposes the transparency and theatricality of all of their performances. In the novel, a significant subplot revolves around Quaint Irene and the less than favourable portrait she paints of Elizabeth

and Major Benjy – a grotesque parody of Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*. Upon revealing the artwork to Georgie, who questions whether the portrait is perhaps a little too cruel, Irene bursts into an impassioned speech. "I never think," she cries, "I *feel*, and that's how I feel. I'm the only person in this petty, scheming world of Tilling who acts on impulse" (*Complete* 2: 551). That it is Quaint Irene who makes this remark is worth explicating. In Tilling, Irene is the strangest of the strange, and undeniably modern: when she first appears in the second novel *Miss Mapp*, she is described as "the suffragette, post-impressionist artist [...], the socialist and the Germanophil" (*Complete* 1: 256). An experimental artist, she regularly wears trousers or dresses up in costume, sports an Eton crop, and lives "in a very queer way" with her maid (258). She is known for her highly original and bizarre ideas, such as living a day backwards (starting with after-dinner whisky and ending with breakfast), and organising a room sideways, with the "ceiling on the left, floor on the right" (*Complete* 2: 187). While she is a regular at social occasions in Tilling, her eccentricity means she is often not part of the scheming or manipulation that takes place in each novel. Unlike the rest of Tilling's residents, though, Irene is not preoccupied by how others perceive her: her refusal of Tilling's social customs is part of her larger refusal to adhere to the structures of heteronormativity.⁴ Irene's outburst, then, is a highly self-referential moment that highlights the repetitious performances that govern both Tilling and the form of the Mapp and Lucia

⁴ Benson's series possesses an undeniable queer impulse through its acceptance of the fluidity of gender and sexuality. For instance, in *Mapp and Lucia*, Irene performs a parody of Felicia Dorothea Hemans's poem "Casabianca" (1826) dressed in a sailor's costume, and she is "surrounded by both sexes of the enraptured youth of Tilling, for the boys knew she was a girl, and the girls thought she looked so like a boy" (*Complete* 2: 138–39). For more on the queerness of the series, see Humble, "Queer Pleasures."

series. As the next two sections show, performance at parties is the norm in Tilling; impulse is the exception.

Un po' di musica: The Piano as Performance

As Lucia emerges out of mourning over the death of her husband Pepino (an event which occurs off the page, between novels) in the early chapters of *Mapp and Lucia*, one of her first goals is to regain control over Riseholme's upcoming Elizabethan fête, which she usually organises. In her absence, the event has been taken on by Lucia's main rival in the village, Daisy Quantock, who has also assumed Lucia's role in the fête as Queen Elizabeth I. However, as is common in the world of the Mapp and Lucia series, this is no straightforward task. Lucia refuses to admit she wants to be involved, angling instead for Daisy to seek out her help. Her plan materialises when Daisy asks for assistance with the fête's organisation (for it is apparent it will be disastrous without Lucia's intervention), and later, for her to take over the part of Queen Elizabeth. As Georgie and Daisy approach Lucia's home, preparing to beg her to reprise her role, Lucia sees them coming. She "sat down at her piano. She had not time to open her music, and so began the first movement of the 'Moonlight' Sonata" (*Complete* 2: 99). This act is entirely for show: Lucia's playing of the piano is intended to feign nonchalance and occupation. But by not having enough time to open her music, the scene also exposes Lucia's weak point: time and time again in the series, she deploys the first movement of "Moonlight Sonata" because it is one of the only piano pieces she can play from memory.

The object of the piano is central to Benson's critique of performance in the Mapp and Lucia series. As *Final Edition* highlights, Benson's interest in music extended into his language, and this is seen too in the Mapp and Lucia series, where lines of dialogue are described as "happy strains" and conspiratorial meddling is likened to a "six-part fugue"

(100–101, 500). But the most rememberable performance of music in the series is surely Lucia's fondness for the "Moonlight Sonata," which acts, as Nathan Waddell argues, as "a shorthand for a certain kind of bourgeois predictability" (82). However, the piano does not always have to be played in order to be an object for performance. Repeatedly in the series, the piano is used for display at parties – a surface where other things can be placed upon it to be appreciated and admired. Pianos themselves as objects also carry different levels of cultural capital. In *Mapp and Lucia*, Elizabeth's "Blumenfelt" piano is promptly replaced by a hired instrument during Lucia's stay at Mallards because of its inadequacy: it is "a remarkable curiosity," with "[s]ome notes [...] like the chirping of canaries," while "others did not sound at all" (*Complete 2*: 101). While the hired piano's maker is not labelled, Lucia owns a Steinway piano in the first three books – one of the finest pianos one can buy. This is, of course, an entirely aspirational move; a type of bourgeois material consumption that characterises much of Lucia's personality.

To ascribe these moments as instances of performativity would be incorrect. Rather than the performative utterances of J. L. Austin or the ingrained gender performativity of Judith Butler, these sorts of performances in the Mapp and Lucia series are deliberate acts, openly recognisable to both readers and the characters within the narrative for their artifice. To borrow from Goffman, Tilling's residents truly play out their lives as if they were always on the stage (26). All forms of self-presentation are conscious and pushed to their excess, devoid of the elasticity that Bergson describes. This may seem to suggest these excessive performances create a dualistic self that is either true or false depending upon the given situation – a theorisation of the self that Goffman rejects (245). But Benson's characters – much like those in Waugh's *Vile Bodies* and Mitford's *Wigs on the Green* – cannot delve into their interiority. Rather, while these performances remain conscious (in contrast to Butlerian performativity), they come to constitute the entire self. The reader never sees a different or

private version of Elizabeth or Lucia: everything, always, is a display. As Kiernan argues, in Tilling “it is performance qua performance that earns respect” amongst its inhabitants (71).

As her propensity to play “Moonlight Sonata” may imply, much of Lucia’s fondness for the piano is focalised through one composer: Ludwig van Beethoven. As Waddell notes, the image of a mythical, “‘colossal’ Beethoven whose music appears to be the natural outpouring of a titanic, monumental mind” was created in the nineteenth century and persisted into the twentieth (4). While she also plays Bach, Brahms, Glazunov, and Mozart throughout the series, Lucia calls Beethoven “the Master” and “commun[es] with” him when playing his music, aligning with this popular representation (*Complete 2*: 428, 443). But as Benson makes clear throughout the series, Lucia’s piano playing certainly has room for improvement: while she is more than capable, she is hardly the highly skilled pianist she thinks she is. In her period of mourning for Pepino, for instance, she learns how to play the funeral march from Piano Sonata No. 12 from memory. But as a funeral march, its tempo is slow and its composition relatively simple—it is far from Beethoven’s more complicated works. Later in the series, she plays selections from the “deevy” (that is, divine) Symphony No. 5 (337)—one of the most iconic and popular compositions in classical music. But its difficulty is undercut in that she plays it as a duet with Georgie: the sheet music is arranged for “four hands” (198). While this certainly makes the piece more playable, Lucia always takes the more difficult treble in order to maximise the possibility of praise from others (“Lucia, as usual, had bagged the treble part, for she said she could never manage that difficult bass” [337]).

Upon her arrival in Tilling in *Mapp and Lucia*, Lucia wastes no time in organising parties that show off her supposed artistic skills. One of these is “*un po’ di musica*,” an evening party where Lucia subjects her social circle to a piano recital (142). The party raises eyebrows from the moment its invitations are sent out, mainly because of its Italian title. Mr Wyse—whose sister has married into an Italian family—feels this is “rather an unusual

inscription" (142). For Lucia, Italian is "*la bella lingua*" and she claims fluency in the language (152). This assertion mostly goes uncontested in Tilling: while the residents have their suspicions, no one has the skills or knowledge needed to know any better. This, too, becomes a recurring plot point: Lucia's purported Italian fluency is usually tested by an external visitor to the village at least once per novel in the series. Each time, it seems impossible for Lucia to be able to keep up the illusion any longer, but she somehow manages to avoid the situation, a repetitive event that supplies its entertainment through the innovative methods Lucia employs to orchestrate her escape.

The party itself is described as "an interminable po-di-mu" and Benson makes use of a range of terms that further point to its yawn-inducing qualities (143). The opening piece, the Moonlight Sonata, is a "slow movement" and is followed by "a long silence" and "a few minutes' pause," before Lucia and Georgie play "innumerable movements by Mozart," followed by "[a] fugue by Bach" (143–44). In particular, the performance of Beethoven is marked by its excessive dramatics. It involves "turn[ing] off all the lights in the room except one on the piano" and having "a long silence" at the end of the piece, before taking "a few minutes' pause" from the performance "to conquer the poignancy of emotion aroused by that exquisite rendering" (143). Here, the break does not share the same meaning for host and guest: while Lucia reads this as an opportunity for rumination, the guests fortify themselves "with cigarettes" and "rapid whiskies and sodas" in order to prepare for the next onslaught of music (143).

The "Moonlight Sonata" is Lucia's most played and iconic piece, especially at parties. But her repeated performances are of just the famous first movement—another joke by Benson, as the second and third movements are comparatively more complicated, and presumably, Lucia lacks the skill to play them (Waddell 83). She tends to pull out the piece for two main scenarios—as a way of looking busy when visitors arrive (as seen in her conversation with Daisy about the fête), and social situations where she wants to show off.

For instance, at her mayoral banquet in *Trouble for Lucia* she “create[s] a precedent by contributing to [the musical entertainment] herself,” performing “an exquisite rendering on the piano of the slow movement of Beethoven’s ‘Moonlight Sonata’” (*Complete* 2: 517). The performance, much like the one at the po-di-mu, “produced a somewhat pensive effect” amongst the audience (517), pointing to the ritualised behaviours that come to be associated with the performance of the piece following Lucia’s arrival in Tilling.

But Lucia’s most dramatic performance of the sonata comes in *Trouble for Lucia*, where she decides to fund the restoration of the village church’s dilapidated organ. While Lucia claims this is part of her bid to give back more often to society, it is really an opportunistic bid to be admired by others. She suggests a special service be held at the church to celebrate the restoration of the organ, followed by a garden party at her home. Lucia frames this as a civic duty: “I do think [...] Tilling would wish for a little pomp and ceremony” (423). But the ceremony includes her own performance of the “Moonlight Sonata,” which she has transposed for the organ especially for the occasion. While Lucia claims she wishes not to be acknowledged as the performer – she (along with Georgie, who is helping her with the organ’s pedals) will be “screened from sight by the curtain” covering the organ (425) – the sonata is so associated with her in Tilling that no one else could possibly be playing it. Diva and Elizabeth “each inwardly visualised the picture of Lucia sitting at her piano with her face in profile against a dark curtain, and her fingers dripping with slow triplets: surely this was the same piece” (426). The sanctity of the performance site further magnifies the theatricality of Lucia’s display. At the garden party, she is interviewed by the local press, where she confirms “it was she who had played the opening piece [...] and [she] hoped that he did not think it a vandalism to adapt the Master,” eliding Georgie’s role and attributing the performance’s success to herself entirely (428). But by continually repeating the same piece – in front of what is, for the most part, the same audience – Lucia

reveals herself not as a master pianist, but rather as a one-trick pony, devoid of both the knowledge and skills needed to be the former.

Lucia's claim to cultural and artistic superiority through the performance of music is further undermined in the series by Olga Bracely, a famous and globally successful prima donna. In *Trouble for Lucia*, Lucia and Georgie are invited to a weekend party at Olga's home in Riseholme, where Lucia relentlessly talks about her duties as Tilling's mayor. Wishing to steer the conversation away from "[m]ayoral topics," Olga brings up Lucia's fondness for Beethoven, "[b]ut the effect of this was appalling," and Lucia "assumed her rapt music-face, and [...] indicated slow triplets on the tablecloth" (597). When they move into the music-room after dinner, she immediately takes up the piano-stool and begins a rendition of the piece, and at its end, "[s]he dwelt long on the last note of the famous slow movement, gazing wistfully up, and they all sighed, according to the traditional usage when Lucia played the 'Moonlight'" (597). But unlike previous performances of the sonata in Tilling, Lucia is usurped: she then offers to accompany Olga while she sings, but "Olga thought she could accompany herself" (597). Not only can Olga sing, but she can play the piano at the same time – a musical one-upmanship Lucia cannot compete with. Olga performs the "'Ave' out of *Lucrezia*" (the fictional opera she tours throughout the series), but Lucia is unable to recognise it: "[w]as it Beethoven? Was it from *Fidelio* or from *Creation Hymn*?" (597).⁵ She eventually resolves to "admire [the performance] with emotion without committing herself to the composer," proclaiming "[t]hat wonderful old tune! [...] Those great melodies are the very foundation-stone of music" (597). This statement immediately exposes Lucia's ignorance: *Lucrezia* is a very modern opera, so "Ave" has no claim to being an "old tune." A

⁵ The first reference in the Mapp and Lucia series to *Lucrezia* is in *Queen Lucia*, which was published in 1920. In an intriguing coincidence, though, Ottorino Respighi's opera *Lucrezia* premiered in 1937, just two years before the publication of *Trouble for Lucia*.

similar scenario occurs later in the novel, when Lucia arrives home late at night after a trip to the Duchess of Sheffield's home and discovers Olga with Georgie in her garden-room, performing "Les Feux Magiques" by "Berlioz," which Lucia mistakenly thinks is the Ave from *Lucrezia* (607). In their sexless marriage of convenience, this is akin to infidelity: music is, after all, the main activity Lucia and Georgie partake in together. This is echoed earlier in the novel, where Georgie dreams of accompanying Olga on the piano, a moment that in its language (and suggestive ellipsis) reads like a sexual encounter: "[s]he stood behind him with her hands on his shoulders, and her face close to his. Then he began singing, too, and their voices blended exquisitely..." (598). Olga, then, is Lucia's rival: the cultured cosmopolitan Lucia wants to be. This is consistent across the entirety of the series, where outsider characters continually show themselves to be more refined, more talented, and more modern than the residents of the village (whether that be Riseholme or Tilling).

Importantly, Lucia's piano is always a tool for performance, even when it is not being played. In *Lucia's Progress*, Lucia begins an archaeological dig in her backyard, claiming to have discovered Roman pottery. She extols her discovery to all of Tilling and the local media, only to then realise the uncovered pieces are only from the previous century: the piece of glass she unearths, inscribed with "Apollina," is only a bottle of Apollinaris sparkling mineral water (395). Refusing to admit her mistake, she finds some broken ceramics in a "basket of dubious treasures" in her home, decides to claim them as "Samian ware," and places the items "casually but prominently disposed" on the piano so they can be seen at her next dinner party (403–04). At the party itself, the guests "assembled before dinner in the garden-room, and there, on the top of the piano, compelling notice, were the bowl and saucer of Samian ware," a moment that stamps out Elizabeth's assertion that the archaeological dig returned no items of significance at all (421). Much of the same occurs in *Trouble for Lucia*, where Tilling's residents refuse to believe Lucia stayed at the home of the Duchess of Sheffield. Lucia — who in fact was uninvited and only stayed for afternoon tea

and to take some photographs – decides the photographs will act as “unshakable ocular evidence of her visit” (614). Assembling a dinner party that very evening, she “leave[s] her scrap-book open on the piano” so it can be spotted by her guests (614). The piano, then, acts as a surface in two senses. In its most immediate sense, the top of the piano is a space upon which something else can be placed. But in a more figurative way, it is superficial and shallow: the objects that sit upon it hint at Lucia’s lack of depth in contriving her outward manner and appearance. The reader never sees an alternative side to Lucia (or indeed, any of Tilling’s residents). In crafting such overt, dramatic performances, Benson calls the self and its interaction with others into question entirely.

Lobster à la Riseholme: Food as Performance

In *Lucia’s Progress*, Lucia celebrates her fiftieth birthday, throwing a party with a “profusion of viands and wine,” attended by all of Tilling’s social circle (*Complete* 2: 329). The next day, during a debrief between Lucia and Georgie about the evening, Georgie comments that Major Benjy “was a bit squiffy,” to which Lucia replies: “I rather like to see people a little, just a little squiffy at my expense [...] It makes me feel I’m being a good hostess” (335). Lucia’s response is part cattiness (she is keenly aware that Elizabeth hates when Benjy gets squiffy, especially in front of others), but also part reflection on the good feelings generated by entertaining and hosting, via the provision of good food and drink. As Lorna Piatti-Farnell and Donna Lee Brien note, food, and the associated acts of cooking and eating, are connected “to the ritual structures of [...] celebration” (2). If food is a crucial part of celebration and festivity, in Benson’s Tilling it also becomes a vital part of party performance. Indeed, as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argues, food can be understood as a “performance medium” in three different senses: to do, to behave, and to show (1). To perform as “to do” is to carry out the act of cooking – to make and serve food; to perform as

“to behave” is to follow the social practices surrounding food; and to perform as “to show” is when food becomes “theatrical” and “spectacular” (1–2). In the Mapp and Lucia series, it is the two latter forms that feature most prominently. Food takes on substantial symbolic meaning at Tilling’s festivities, epitomising the lengths to which its characters will go to present an idealised front.

The dishes that appear in Benson’s novels are noteworthy not just for the central role they play in the plot: as his fondness of food metaphors for describing the state of modern fiction demonstrate, Benson had a strong interest in the culinary arts. Food was a central aspect of Benson’s daily routine at Lamb House: breakfast was always at nine, before Benson read the newspapers, and discussed with his cook the menus for the day’s two remaining meals (Masters 274). Three courses were always served at lunch and dinner, and Benson wore black tie to dinner, even if he was dining alone (274). Benson always selected his meals himself: Masters writes that “he had [...] a culinary expertise which was much envied by those who cooked regularly” (274). Benson’s interest in food (as both an eater and a writer) becomes apparent in the Mapp and Lucia novels, where dishes (and the drinks that accompany them) function as another way in which its central characters can attempt to display social sophistication, capital, and dominance. Whether luxurious or frugal, complicated or simple, food is a weapon in the Tillingites’ machinations for social supremacy.

The prominence and prevalence of food in the festivities of Mapp and Lucia is unsurprising given the major food overhaul Britain underwent in the 1920s and 1930s. As Humble notes, the return and expansion of leisure and pleasure and dwindling number of domestic servants following the First World War caused this shift (“Little Swans” 329). Middle-class women struggled to find cooks to employ and were forced to cook for themselves and their family for the first time—leading to “the birth of the idea of food preparation as a creative, fashionable activity” (330). The French chef Boulestin, arguably the

first celebrity chef of the twentieth century, spearheaded this movement for food and cooking to be seen as stylish. His first cookbook — *Simple French Cooking for English Homes* — was published in 1923 and was reprinted several times in quick succession. Boulestin continued to publish several cookbooks over the interwar years, and also ran a successful restaurant in Covent Garden that was widely regarded to be one of the city's best; Restaurant Boulestin was regularly featured in *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar* as being one of the most stylish places to be seen dining.⁶ Boulestin's appeal can largely be contributed to his straightforward approach to food. He prefaces his recipes in *Simple French Cooking* by explaining that authentic French cooking is that of the "*bourgeois* family," defined by "excellence, simplicity, and cheapness" rather than the English preconception of it being "complicated, rich, and expensive" (v). Cooking is an activity to be enjoyed, rather than to be dreaded, and this can be achieved by using fresh, seasonal produce, and simple dishes that showcase these ingredients' flavours (vi, 5). Ambrose Heath, another prominent food writer in the 1930s, similarly emphasised the importance of eating seasonally: his cookbooks *Good Food* (1932) and *More Good Food* (1933) organise their recipes by month, providing lists of what fruit, vegetables, and meat happen to be in season. The books were also designed to be taken into the kitchen and consulted closely. The prefatory pages of *More Good Food* state that "[a]ttention is drawn to the fact that the cover of *More Good Food* is WATERPROOF and WASHABLE" (7), meaning that any food splatters were easily managed (and perhaps even encouraged).

Boulestin and Heath both place sociability at the centre of their cookbooks and recipes. As Phil Lyon argues, "[s]ociability was probably the bedrock of [Heath's] interest and expertise in the pleasure of food and dining" during the interwar years (101–02). This is certainly evident in Heath's introduction to *Good Food*, where he points to the book's value

⁶ See, for example: Bowker; Fleming; "Gastronome."

for the generation who are now learning “the value of entertaining and of the great part which food and drink play in it” after the “upheaval” of the First World War (14–15). He also highlights the ties between social success, entertaining, and food: “[t]here are many ambitious young hostesses to-day [...] with an eye to social advancement. A certain way of achieving a reputation for discrimination lies through their ability to provide pleasant and attractive meals” (15). Boulestin’s work similarly emphasised the link between food and entertaining. His 1937 cookbook *The Finer Cooking* is subtitled *Dishes for Parties* and provides extensive commentary on party-appropriate fare and behaviour alongside recipes; in *A Second Helping* (1925), his follow-up to *Simple French Cooking*, he writes that “[c]uisine should be taken seriously first of all by the cook [...], and also by both hostesses and guests” (1). In Boulestin’s mind, food should be understood as the essence of entertaining itself: this, he argues, is obstructed by an “English habit of not talking about food” (11). He frames this idea in explicitly theatrical terms, asking the reader to “visualise the preparations” of a dinner for twelve (11). This imagined scene describes the arrangements of those involved, such as “the hostess carefully supervising the menu,” “the cook up at dawn,” and “five women in their own houses wondering what to wear and if the meal will be up to the mark” (12). There is a flurry of emotion in “the last few moments before the curtain [...] goes up: anxiety, peace, despair, hope, felt in turn with equal intensity” (12). But at the table itself, “[d]ish after dish is carelessly eaten as if the performance was rather a bore” despite everyone “immensely enjoy[ing] the evening” (12). In using the language of the stage, Boulestin highlights the inherently dramatic nature of entertaining and sociability.

But to eat well, one must take an interest in the cooking process. It is impossible, Boulestin argues, for your cook or servant “to be interested in her work and proud of the results if you yourself are indifferent to them” (*Simple* 1). Boulestin also suggests going to the greengrocer in person to select the best fruit and vegetables: if, as a result of this, the greengrocer “does not like your ways, do not change them – change him” (5). It is important

to care about what you cook and serve to others because food is at the centre of successful entertaining: “[n]othing is more pleasant than to receive your friends at your table; nothing more perfect if the food is good; but nothing more painful, for them, if it is bad” (1). The freshness, seasonality, and simplicity of French cooking meant the cuisine came to be associated in Britain with sophistication and flavour (especially when contrasted with the dullness of British food). Even just giving a dish a French name could lend it new appeal: Lady Agnes Jekyll’s *Kitchen Essays* (1922) cheekily suggests “re-christen[ing]” your “inevitable as a mother-in-law, dreary as the weekly washing book” meal of roast leg of mutton to “*Gigot de Six Heures*” as a way to revitalise your weekly menus (13). *Mapp and Lucia* engages with this discourse of Frenchness as sophistication via the series’ most famous dish, *Lobster à la Riseholme*.

Catalysing the central complication in *Mapp and Lucia*, the dish epitomises the lengths to which Lucia and Elizabeth will go to outwit, outperform, and outdo each other. Food is a key weapon for Lucia and Elizabeth at parties; the menus served act as indicators of social excellence and cultural capital. As Mather argues, food has always been central to the comedy of manners, and this is further amplified in Tilling because there are no love interests or prospects of matrimony to discuss (17–18). The dish generates “a great deal of wild surmise” in Tilling, as no one can quite figure out how it is made (*Complete 2*: 179), but Lucia betrays the social conventions of the village by refusing to give Elizabeth the recipe. The precedent before her arrival had been “to impart [...] culinary mysteries to friends, so that they might enjoy their favourite dishes at each other’s houses” (179), an amiable act of sociality. Boulestin confirms the diplomacy and etiquette associated with sharing recipes in *The Finer Cooking*, describing the process as a “little parlour game” that is “part of the fabric of our civilization” (18). If a recipe is shared from one friend to another, the “first duty” of the recipient is to cook the dish and ask for their friend to come and try it, but the recipient

must ensure the dish is not perfectly recreated, to give the friend “the chance of showing the superiority of her own cooking” (18–19). But none of this process is allowed to unfold in Tilling. Shrouded in secrecy, *Lobster à la Riseholme* becomes a marker of Lucia’s social standing; she deliberately withholds the recipe because she thrives off the speculation and attention it brings. The dish is coveted because of its originality: the recipe is Lucia’s own devising. When Elizabeth rifles through Lucia’s collection of recipes, she “rapidly” passes by a newspaper clipping for “*oeufs à l’aurore*” and a manuscript page for “cheese straws,” but “the pearl of great price” is *Lobster à la Riseholme*, suggesting its distinctiveness (*Complete* 2: 228). The value of the dish is further amplified through its name: Lucia’s addition of *à la* is a gauche attempt to enhance the dish’s sophistication and novelty.

The novel’s climax comes on Boxing Day – a day that servants are traditionally given as a holiday – when Elizabeth sneaks into Lucia’s kitchen, intent on finding the recipe herself. As the location where food preparation takes place, the kitchen is a space where guests are never admitted (especially in Tilling), functioning as one of Goffman’s back regions. Such a grand violation of private space, as Benson shows the reader, deserves grand punishment. Having copied out the recipe, Elizabeth is about to leave when Lucia walks in; the novel then lurches into chaos as a nearby river bursts its banks, with a freakish flood entering the kitchen and sweeping Elizabeth and Lucia out of the house, clinging to nothing but an upside-down kitchen table. As Humble argues, this moment shows how Benson makes “the day-to-day minutiae of domestic detail [...] tip over into surrealism” (*Feminine Middlebrow Novel* 60). Like the Genesis flood, the surging river is a judgement upon Elizabeth’s wrongdoing. Furthermore, bringing the kitchen table from its private location into a shared communal space also brings the site of recipe-making and domestic labour out into the open, publicising Elizabeth’s transgression.

The sudden deluge, as Caserio notes, parodies George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* in order to rebuff the realism of the Victorian novel (201). As the pair are washed out to sea,

with their friends watching from village's high street, Lucia is "seen to put her arm round the huddled form of Mapp, and comfort her" (*Complete* 2: 231), much like Maggie and Tom Tulliver's final reconciliatory embrace before their boat capsizes. Benson also makes reference to the Biblical inscription on Maggie and Tom's tomb. With Elizabeth and Lucia presumed dead, the Padre holds a commemorative service, reading from the second book of Samuel: "[t]hey were lovely and pleasant in their lives and in their death they were not divided" (244). When Major Benjy and Georgie elect to construct a cenotaph in memory of Elizabeth and Lucia in Tilling's churchyard, they choose "[i]n death they were not divided" as the inscription (249).

Benson's parody succeeds through the sheer impossibility of the sequence: the flood is so fantastic that the equally ludicrous chance of Elizabeth and Lucia's survival becomes entirely within the realm of possibility. Given Lucia has never "failed to emerge triumphant from the most menacing situations," the reader knows their return is evitable (236). Elizabeth and Lucia are the epicentre of Tilling's skirmishes, and without them, the series loses its entertainment. Cues in the narrative also suggest Lucia's actions in the flood are not entirely innocent. While the Padre praises Lucia at the service for "her womanly work of comforting and encouraging her weaker sister" in the face of death (244), Lucia's final words predict the eventual return of the pair: "[w]e'll come back: just wait till we come back" (231). Rather than a call of positivity to her distraught friends, Lucia's "just wait" is full of anticipation about revealing what Elizabeth did. As one of the village residents correctly surmises, "she wanted to tell us that she'd found Elizabeth in her kitchen" (234). Lucia's strategic comment ensures that she maintains her position as the dominant social figure.

Unlike Maggie and Tom, Elizabeth and Lucia live through their ordeal: they suddenly reappear in the village several months later, revealing Italian fishermen rescued them. But in surviving, Benson suggests, the pair are still divided, and the issue of *Lobster à la Riseholme* is by no means settled. This plays out in the novel's final party, held to celebrate

the engagement of Elizabeth and Major Benjy. Elizabeth promises “a splendid surprise for everybody” (270). At first, the party seems to have all the material and social markers for success: “[a]ll the intimate circle of Tilling was there, the sideboard groaned with [...] expensive wines, and everyone felt that the hatchet [...] was buried” (270). This sense of restored peace is quickly shattered, however, once the guests spot menu cards (despite it only being lunch, when menu cards are usually not used) declaring the first dish to be *Lobster à la Risesholme*. This material object instantly transforms the party and the serving of the dish into a theatrical display – what Kirshenblatt-Gimblett calls the “showing” of food (2). It reveals that Lucia’s coveted recipe has been uncovered, and the “gay talk” of the festivities disappears as each guest puts the puzzle pieces together (*Complete* 2: 271). The dish is first served to Lucia, who finds the dish, of course, now tastes precisely how it should. With everyone now keenly aware of Elizabeth’s devious means, Lucia attempts to save face, suggesting perhaps Elizabeth had failed to copy out the recipe correctly, and that she should “pop into my kitchen some afternoon when you are going for your walk – never mind if I am in or not – and look at it again [...] you will find the recipe in a book on the kitchen-shelf. But you know that, don’t you?” (271). The novel’s final line – “[t]hen everybody began to talk in a great hurry” (271) – encapsulates the tension between politeness and excitement in Tilling. Moreover, the exchange exemplifies the theatrical social behaviours surrounding food. While on the surface the conversation may appear polite and innocuous, it is dripping with malice: it confirms to the guests their long-held suspicions and denies Elizabeth the social superiority she hopes to gain through the act of serving the dish.

Frustratingly, the recipe remains a mystery to the reader. We know from the descriptions of the dish that it is served in a casserole, its sauce is pink in colour, and it contains cheese, shrimps, and cream (181). The reader is also tantalisingly teased with the “luscious” opening words of the recipe: “[t]ake two hen lobsters” (228). Susan J. Leonardi

suggests the withholding of the recipe highlights the fictionality of the narrative: in refusing to reveal the ingredients or method, the dish can never be exactly reproduced in reality (345). In being denied the recipe, the reader descends to the level of the social-climbing Elizabeth. This is Benson's comic vision fully imagined: Elizabeth's pretence and scheming are derisive, yet at the same time are reflected in the reader's own desire to know the recipe – and to thus be “in the know.” In doing so, Benson jolts his readers (rather than his characters) back to full sociability.

While *Lobster à la Riseholme* is one of Lucia's more luxurious dishes, her menus turn to austerity once she begins her mayoral duties in *Trouble for Lucia*. Wishing to have her “finger on the pulse” of Tilling (*Complete 2*: 474), she resolves to set an example in both her public and private life, choosing to enter an “era of plain living” by eating frugally (522).⁷ Lucia's thriftiness in *Trouble for Lucia* riffs on the interwar economic climate, inserting the novel into late 1930s debates surrounding the effects of austerity. The continued dominance of the Treasury view and fiscal austerity throughout the decade meant recovery from the effects of the Slump was slow until rearmament (Blyth 191). Meanwhile, John Maynard Keynes was calling for fiscal stimulus in times of recession. As he wrote in the *Times* in 1937, “[t]he boom, not the slump, is the right time for austerity at the Treasury,” in the first recorded usage of “austerity” as a term referring to restrained public spending (13). In the small-scale world of Tilling, Lucia's austerity comes to stand for government austerity: just

⁷ This is not the first time that the series engages with concerns about the economy and supply and demand. Reflecting the early 1920s tensions in the mining industry, Elizabeth hoards food in *Miss Mapp* in fear of an impending coal strike, storing her provisions in a concealed cupboard in Mallards's garden room. When she hosts a bridge party in the garden room and the door to the cupboard bursts open, her goods unceremoniously tumble out in front of her guests, exposing her secret.

as fiscal policy was impacting the everyday lives of citizens, Lucia's economic decisions have direct implications (albeit decidedly less serious) upon her social circle.

As always, there is a clear theatrical aspect to Lucia's resolution: she wants to live a private and simple life—in a very public way. When she proposes the plan to Georgie, she states "I shall certainly make a point of buying very cheap, simple provisions" and "I wish it to be known that I do my catering with economy. To be heard ordering neck of mutton at the butcher's" (*Complete 2*: 473). This declaration—ordering neck of mutton at the butcher's—thus becomes a display of austerity chic that Lucia hopes will lend her appeal to the "common people" of Tilling (474). As Rebecca Bramall notes, austerity chic can be understood as a "self-conscious *performance* of thriftiness in a bid to further one's cultural capital" (12). For Georgie, Lucia's motivations seem suspect:

Lucia did not care two straws what 'the common people' were saying. She, in the hour of shopping in the High Street, wanted to know what fresh mischief Elizabeth Mapp-Flint was hatching, and what Major Benjy Mapp-Flint was at, and whether Diva Plaistow's Irish Setter had got mange, and if Irene Coles had obtained the sanction of the Town Surveying Department to paint a fresco on the front of her house of a nude Venus rising from the sea, and if Susan Wyse had really sat down on her budgerigar, squashing it quite flat. Instead of which she gassed about the duty of the Mayor Elect of Tilling to have her finger on the pulse of the place, like Catherine the Great. (*Complete 2*: 474)

Lucia's chief interest, of course, is in the mundane details of domesticity among her intimate social circle. What Georgie fails to recognise, though, is that Lucia also needs the continued support of Tilling's common people to maintain her political power, which she thinks she can achieve through her displays of frugality. But Lucia's power over the whole village (through her position as mayor) does not map neatly onto her authority within her social circle, which measures the social supremacy of its members through the quality of their

parties. While her “plain living” may attract Tilling’s voters, it does not have the same effect upon her social set. Refusing to play bridge for money for fear that her constituents find out she gambles, Lucia suggests the group play for nothing; this leads to stultifying bridge parties where no one is interested in the game. Moreover, when Elizabeth happens to be visiting her around lunchtime, she is shocked to find that Lucia serves her “hashed mutton and treacle pudding” (524). When Elizabeth reports this back to the group, she criticises Lucia for providing such a simple meal to a guest (albeit an unexpected one): “[j]ust what I should have had at home except that it was beef and marmalade” (524). Similarly, after a “mirthless” dinner party at Lucia’s, the Padre describes the evening meal as possessing “[a]n unusual parsimony” (524). Because socialising and entertaining are central to life in Tilling, Lucia’s turn to austerity cannot take place without risking her social dominance amongst her friends, and the plan is quickly abandoned.

The plainness of food again becomes the centre of attention at the end of the novel, albeit in a slightly different way, when the novelist Susan Leg arrives in Tilling. Elizabeth invites her over to dinner, describing it as a potluck and therefore suggesting it will be an everyday, regular meal.⁸ However, Diva later learns that the meal was anything but potluck:

Tomato soup, middle-cut of Salmon sent over from Hornbridge, a brace of grouse from Rice’s, Melba peaches, but only bottled with custard instead of cream, and tinned caviare. And Elizabeth called it pot-luck! I never had such luck there, pot or unpot. (633)

This menu – filled with foods that signify a very decent income – is a deliberate ploy on Elizabeth’s part. While Lucia wishes to be known for her restraint, Elizabeth wishes to be known for her excesses, hoping guests infer that if the Mapp-Flints dine like this on an

⁸ Benson’s use of “potluck” here is in the sense of “a person’s accepting another’s hospitality at a meal without any special preparation having been made” (Oxford English Dictionary, “potluck, n.”).

ordinary evening, their entertaining menus must be even more extravagant. But this plan to project an image of wealth almost backfires when Susan suggests another evening at the Mapp-Flints', stating that "just a plain little meal" like the previous potluck would be enough (636). For Elizabeth, while she is "desperately anxious" keep up the relationship, another "plain little meal could not be managed" (636). These two examples illustrate how "plainness" is performed differently in different contexts: on the one hand, a display of austerity; on the other, an ostentatious show of wealth. Both types of performances demonstrate the showiness of performances in the series: food is mobilised for social climbing and becomes a deliberate site of spectacle regardless of its quality or quantity.

Meals, then, are always judged in Tilling: the provision and quality of food and drink determine whether parties in Tilling are social successes. For instance, in *Lucia's Progress*, a catastrophic dinner party held by the Wysees leads to "a scene of carnage," largely because of insufficiency in food and excess in drink (404). Taking place during Lucia's archaeological dig – a period of high "social blood pressure" – the party is doomed before it even begins (404). The first issue is the number of guests: ten guests gather for dinner instead of the planned eight, due to a communication mishap between Susan and the Padre and Evie. This throws the whole evening into chaos: there are now too many people to play bridge, and food intended for eight must now be shared by ten. Susan's strategy is to make up for the deficiency in food by a surplus of alcohol: the hock is swapped for champagne, and the dessert – chestnut ice *à la Capri* – is boozed up via the addition of brandy. Elizabeth is placed in "starvation corner" (that is, the seat to the left of the host, and therefore the last to be served), and receives nothing but "spine and [...] shining black mackintosh" for the fish course, and her first glass of champagne is "merely foam" (405). Conversely, Lucia takes the seat to the right of Mr Wyse, meaning she is the first person after the host to be served, and thus receives the best spoils on the food front, receiving some "nice slices" of the breast during the poultry course (406). Here, Benson playfully uses the conventions of the dining

room table to indicate who has the upper hand in the Roman artefact debacle: by placing Lucia as the most important guest, it becomes clear that she will be victorious in this particular battle. As Montrose in the 1935 guide *Everyday Etiquette* notes, the host leads the entrance to the dining room, with the “principal lady guest,” followed by the other pairings (which are never husband and wife or close relatives [16]). Guests then find their seats, with the women taking the seat to the right of their partner (16). Lucia, as the oldest (and wealthiest) woman present, becomes the principal lady guest. The mismatch in quantities of food and drink causes a number of problems: Major Benjy gets progressively more drunk, while Elizabeth becomes convinced Lucia was encouraging Benjy to drink to excess, telling Diva that Lucia “can’t leave men alone” (*Complete* 2: 416). This sets off a chain of feuds that suspend all entertaining in Tilling: the Wyses are blamed for supplying too much alcohol in the evening, leaving them “aloof” towards everyone; Elizabeth and Diva refuse to talk to Lucia; and Irene refuses to speak to Elizabeth and Diva (416). Lucia, feigning ignorance about the whole thing, is the one to mend the rifts after Diva begs her to have one of her “simple little parties” to reunify the group (421).

Lucia’s party is the antithesis to the Wyses’: she instructs her staff to start every dish at Elizabeth (who is seated in the privileged position to the right of the host), and guests are offered barley-water as well as wine. While the conversation is initially a little stiff, by the end of the evening “the serene orbs of heaven twinkled benignly over a peaceful Tilling,” all thanks to Lucia’s efforts (422). Parties divide, but they also can heal: serving the right types and quantities of food and drink yields greater opportunities for social success. Yet both reader and characters alike know that this peace can only ever be temporary in Tilling, as the repetition of the series means it is only a matter of time before the next party – and the next battle – begins.

In generating its pleasure, Benson’s series oscillates between predictability and unpredictability, creating a narrative that is hyperaware of its fictionality. This self-

reflexivity reaches a crescendo in the late stages of *Trouble for Lucia*, with Susan Leg's arrival. Publishing under the *nom de plume* Rudolph da Vinci, Susan writes bestselling romance fiction with "an aristocratic setting" (626). Her visit to Tilling is to get inspiration for a future novel on the "centre of provincial English life" (626). With this new work, she intends to show her usual audience that "life is as full of human interest in any simple, humble country village as in Belgravia" (626). While Lucia tells Georgie that "[w]e don't want best-sellers to write up our cultured vivid life here" because it would be "cheap and vulgarising," Georgie knows Lucia really wants nothing more than a novel "with the scene laid in Tilling, and with herself, quite undisguised, as head of its social and municipal activities" (626–27). Of course, Benson is already doing what Susan Leg is proposing, and what Lucia wants: creating popular entertainment out of Tilling's happenings.

Benson's novels depict a village where no one (except Quaint Irene) can act impulsively, making festivity a calculated and deliberate ritual. As this chapter has explicated, characters enact theatrical performances through music and food in their bid for social excellence and dominance. In the case of music, this manifests in the piano, which functions both as an instrument for playing works such as Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata" and as a surface for displaying other objects for dramatic effect. Performances involving food, meanwhile, continually move between excess and restraint, and luxuriousness and plainness, and are determined by the given social climate in Tilling at the time of the party. The relative absence of modernity in the series acts as a tool for critiquing these performances: while the characters hope their actions lead to social and cultural refinement, they are so behind the true avant-garde that these exercises are only futile. Through the serial form of the Mapp and Lucia novels, Benson emphasises the repetitiveness and transparency of social performance, while also demonstrating the pleasures to be gained from reading popular fiction. In doing so, Benson emphatically speaks up for the value of readability and accessibility, an ethos reflected in his interwar commentaries.

While *Trouble for Lucia* ends with Lucia triumphant — being the Mayor and successfully proving her friendship with the Duchess of Sheffield — it would be unreasonable to assume this is where Lucia's (or Mapp's) aspirations for cultural and social capital end. Indeed, Mitford — a long-time admirer of the Mapp and Lucia novels — recounted staying at Highcliffe Castle along with Benson shortly after the publication of *Trouble for Lucia*. Mitford recounts talking with Benson about Lucia “for hours,” and Benson asked her, “[w]hat must she do now?” (Mitford, Foreword 10). He died in February 1940, although Mitford suggests “can we doubt that if he had lived Lucia would have become a General?” (10). Mitford's comment directly relates Tilling to the world surrounding it, implying Lucia's actions reflect the historical contexts of the day. Tilling retreats from history and modernity, but at the same time, in the fraught political climate of the late 1930s, Lucia becomes a politician; in the Second World War, then, it is only natural that she would have been a military leader. Benson's novels thus demonstrate how power is fought for, won, and lost, regardless of whether that power is registered at the small and local scale — such as at Tilling's parties — or at the large and global. Mitford's speculation captures the essence of the series: any successful pinnacle reached by these characters is just not enough, and they are bound to repeat the same performances at parties over and over again.

Conclusion Party Going

The interwar period was, in many ways, the peak of the party in Britain. The outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939 effectively placed party-going on hold, with the introduction of blackouts, evacuations, and food and petrol rationing over the next year limiting opportunities to host, entertain, or go out of an evening. *War Begins at Home*, a 1940 publication produced by Mass Observation, described the initial impact of the war as “a mental hopelessness, and the utter disappearance of anything like a future” (223). In particular, they noted the effects the war had on leisure: “[t]he whole structure of British leisure is being changed by the black-out” (194), and “[t]he word ‘Black-out’ has become a synonym and symbol of a shut-down on [...] leisure” (221). In the same year, Robert Graves and Alan Hodge titled the final chapter in their social commentary on interwar Britain, *The Long Week-End*, “Rain Stops Play, 1939,” indicative of the changing mood that had taken hold of the country (438).

Published in the same month war was declared, Henry Green’s darkly comic novel *Party Going* and its themes of restlessness, listlessness, and the ultimately unsatisfying pursuit of pleasure, capture the ambivalent feelings that came to characterise the late 1930s and the Phoney War. The events of the novel all occur over a day at a London train station, where a group of young and wealthy socialites headed to a party in France take residence in the station hotel after heavy fog cancels all services. Scenes of mundane activity in the hotel (taking baths, drinking cocktails, painting nails, picking noses) are interspersed with descriptions of the steadily increasing mass of people in the terminal. A character remarks in one of the novel’s most well-known lines that the swarming crowd are ideal “targets for a bomb” (178). As Marina MacKay argues, “throughout this insistently trivial novel about insistently trivial people, there runs a sense of obscure but unmistakable foreboding” (“Is” 1603). The novel’s title encapsulates the tension that MacKay identifies. Most immediately it

suggests the verb “party-going,” referring to the act of attending parties, and usually used to indicate frequent participation in such events. However, when the two words are read separately, “going” means less heading towards or attending something, than to depart, bid farewell, or take leave. The novel, as MacKay argues, “describes a festivity turning into a funeral” (*Modernism* 93). *Party Going*, then, is trapped between arriving and leaving, future and past, and going forward and going back, capturing the liminality of the interwar party and adjacent forms of leisure and pleasure.

Party Going as a novel is, in itself, delayed. While it was published in 1939, it was written from 1931 to 1938, something that leaves its mark on the novel’s content. Green’s characters – young, rich, flippanant – seem to be those of 1931: Bright Young People caught up in romantic entanglements and gossip. But the narrative itself does not indicate its place in time, a “temporal opacity” that Ridge reads as being key to unfolding the novel’s meaning (*Portable Modernisms* 169). Combined with the ominous mood that strikes the characters, there is a sense the novel’s characters are late to more than just their party. Indeed, in their current point in time – whenever that may be – they are no longer able to recreate the activities of the past. The party in France replicates one held twelve months previously, something Green only reveals about a quarter of the way into the novel. But the fog-induced delay creates a variance between the two events: as Julia thinks to herself, the first party was “so fantastically different from this” (71–72). It is “this promise of where they were going” that is “common” to all of the party holed up in the hotel (72). Yet when the novel ends with the group finally about to depart the station, it is unclear if their destination will deliver any promise at all.

For a novel in which not much happens (and no actual partying takes place), parties drive the narrative. To summarise the plot again in a different way: a party of people – headed to a party just like another previous party – are occupied by the question of whether a letter claiming someone was unable to attend yet another party (even though they were

never invited in the first place), was written by that someone, or indeed, someone else. The multitude of variously uncertain parties and people emphasise the insignificance of the concerns of those in the hotel relative to the masses accumulating below them.

This distinction is illustrated through the group's conversations in the hotel, which are frequently pointless or end up leading nowhere. This is characteristic of the novel's style as a whole: as Milthorpe argues, in *Party Going* "narrative meaning is overlaid, ossified, made indeterminate, or dismissed entirely" ("Things" 101). Even conversations that verge towards potential depth turn out to endlessly circle before being cut off, as seen in this exchange involving Alex, Amabel, Julia, and Angela:

When he came back and gave Amabel what she wanted he was struck again by how glum they seemed. He said into their silence, "and to think this is supposed to be the happiest time of our lives." Julia did not understand. "Why now exactly?" she said from far away. "Well, we're young," he said, "we'll never be young again you see." "Why aren't you happy then?" she said, as though she was on an ivory tower. "That's not the point," said he, his eyes on Amabel, "but I'm so bored." "Aren't we all?" she said and because she thought this sort of conversation silly Miss Crevy broke in by asking Amabel what kind of nail polish she used. (197-98)

Glum, happy, bored, silly – the passage cycles through a range of emotions, but never definitively settles on one. This textual and emotional restlessness evacuates their conversation of any real substance. The temporality of this conversation, too, is ambiguous. "Said" is the only dialogue tag used throughout, and without any adverbs to indicate tone, the passage's plainness flattens the dialogue and encourages the reader to consume it quickly. But at the same time, while there are no textual indicators of silence or pauses in thought, Julia's spatial distancing from the rest of the group – she is "far away [...] on an ivory tower" – points to the possibility of a stretched-out temporality. The only real

indicator of rhythm comes with Angela's sudden query about nail polish ("Miss Crevy broke in"), but this is a moment of rupture that brings an end to the discussion entirely.

Deliberately drawing on definitional ambiguity, Green's repeated use of the word "go" and its conjugations from the title onwards further emphasises the novel's indeterminacy. For instance, Julia tells Amabelle that "I do hate people who go away, darling, [...] not physically I mean, [...] but when they are in a room and then they go and leave one" (196–97). At the core of this somewhat bewildering sentence is Julia's chief anxiety: her issue is not with those who go towards something with purpose, but those who leave her behind, pointing to her childlike desire to keep things near her (namely, Max and her "charms" [18]). As the narrator describes, people who find themselves "alone with Julia could not help feeling they had been left in charge" because of her helplessness (40). Julia is incapable of "going" anywhere alone. This is exemplified through her solo journey on foot to the train station, which leaves her "frightened," "anonymous" (16), and feeling that "things were so wrong" (18). Temporality shapes her worries: while the present and past are tangible, the future is unknown and indeterminable. As Julia crosses a footbridge on her journey, she "had to stand still" and look "at the stagnant water beneath" – a moment of stasis – but this is interrupted by movement when "three seagulls" fly under the bridge (19). Julia wants to stop, but doing so means the world keeps moving forward without her. Parties, which are experienced in the present and then remembered as events from the past, thus offer Julia comfort and solace; that they are nowhere to be found in *Party Going* compounds the future's uncertainty. The planned party in France is an anchor of surety for Julia (she has "been looking forward to it for weeks"), but the delays at the station that threaten its viability throw her into complete chaos (102). Of the group in the hotel, it is Julia who is most likely to suffer from the potentially dark consequences of wherever "going" may take her.

“Going” returns most forcefully in the novel’s final lines, after Max invites the infamous Embassy Richard, the man at the centre of the letter scandal, to join the group on their trip:

“But weren’t you going anywhere?” Amabel said to Richard, only she looked at Max.

“I can go where I was going afterwards,” he said to all of them and smiled. (255)

Again, “going” is deliberately obtuse and eludes meaning. Where is Richard meant to be going (if at all), and what situation is it that allows him to decide to go there later instead so casually? It is this vagueness — this unwillingness to make concrete statements, the inability for any of the characters to be entirely truthful about what they mean — that adds to the looming feeling that the only situation the characters are “going” towards is not a party, but uncertainty.

While at the end of the novel it seems the group will indeed reach their destination as the fog lifts and the platforms open, we get no insight into the party itself, or how the complex relationships between the characters will be negotiated or solved. For Ridge, the novel is “an impressionistic vision of the long interwar weekend, but with the climax as yet unwritten” (*Portable Modernisms* 169). Additionally, I would suggest that it is unclear whether this climax will ever be experienced at all. The party (in the sense of a spatiotemporal event) never happens in the narrative; as a result, the party (in the sense of the group within the hotel) never unifies or coheres. What is gone, therefore, at the end of *Party Going* is the party itself: it is no longer an achievable, tangible form of sociability. With its interest in temporality and liminality, the novel speaks to the immediate pre-war mood about the future of leisure.

These texts from 1939 and 1940 present a decidedly gloomy take on the state of parties and pleasure. However, leisure activities did pick up after the first few months of the war, as society adjusted to its new conditions. As an employee of the Dorchester in London told Mass Observation, the hotel initially “dropped” entertainment and dancing, but soon

“found people were wanting it, missed it,” and resumed their offerings (Mass Observation 225). But the war certainly modified public modes of sociability, as shown by the Blackout Stroll, a new dance that playfully engaged with the current state. “[T]he perfect answer to the Air-Raid Blues,” according to its advertising (qtd. in Mass Observation 197), the Blackout Stroll’s novelty came from extinguishing the lights mid-dance and changing partners in the dark, captured in the lyrics “[w]hisper, ‘See ya later’, to your baby doll / For now we change our partners in the ‘Blackout Stroll’” (qtd. in Mass Observation 231). As the war progressed into the 1940s, party locales were targeted in British propaganda. Several posters for the “Careless Talk Costs Lives” campaign, which discouraged talking about sensitive or classified information when it could easily be overheard, invoked the setting of an officers’ club. For instance, one poster features a woman in an evening gown surrounded by men in military dress, and is splashed with the slogan “[k]eep mum, she’s not so dumb!”, warning officers that even a *femme fatale* could remember and share information, or be a spy herself (figure 7.1).



Figure 7.1: Harold Forster, *Keep Mum, She's Not So Dumb!* propaganda poster, 1942
© Imperial War Museum (Art.IWM PST 4095).

Still, resonances of the party-going culture of the 1920s and 1930s remain with us today. In June 2019, ninety years on from the reports of parties that this thesis begins with in its introduction, I travelled to London for a conference and some final archival research. Flicking through the pages of the *Evening Standard* on the Tube one evening, I came across a double page spread titled "'Tis the Season." The subheading read: "[l]ast night's V&A bash was the official start of London's summer of parties. Your invitation may have been lost in the post, but fear not – The Londoner's Phoebe Luckhurst has drunk the champagne so you don't have to" (22–23). In the present day, then, the London season is very much alive, although (as the article notes) it is as exclusive than ever. "What follows," Luckhurst writes in her introduction to the piece, "is a guide to this summer's most exquisite and exclusive events," except "you're almost definitely not on the list" (22). Royal Ascot, for instance, is attended by "a smattering of heirs," while the Old Vic Midsummer Party has Judi Dench on its organising committee: an anonymous source confirms in the article that "[s]he knows how to throw a good party" (22). But what struck me most was that the article's descriptions of parties are so similar to those in tabloid gossip columns of the 1920s and 1930s: who will be there, what menus will be served, titbits of gossip, and each party's unique selling point. Like the columnists of the *Bystander* or the *Sketch*, Luckhurst offers the *Evening Standard's* readers a tantalising peek into high society, a group far beyond the social position of most of the newspaper's readers. But in doing so, the article entrenches the exclusivity of these events ("you're [...] not on the list"). Despite the many attempts to level social inequality in the years since the Second World War (particularly post-austerity, pre-Thatcherism), divisions of class and wealth are as exclusionary as ever in the twenty-first century, and continue to be played out through popular forms of entertainment – whether that be the tabloid newspaper or the novel.

Parties continue to saturate our contemporary consciousness, from their narrative function as a site for drama in reality television (the cocktail parties of *The Bachelor* franchise,

for example), to news items about Facebook event invitations going viral and opinion editorials on parents holding extravagant birthday celebrations for their children.¹ The ongoing interest in parties displays the relevance of the interwar comic novel to understanding human behaviour and culture, both past and present. While the etiquette, dress, menus, and manners and modes may have changed over the last century, parties at their core continue to register many of the same concerns as they did in the interwar years. The comedy of these novels still resonates with contemporary readers as they bring to the fore the complexity of navigating social life, whether that be in the 1920s or 2020s.

This thesis begins the work of understanding the early twentieth-century party, as it was represented and lived: its proliferation, diversity, and complexity in the interwar years. It argues that analyses of modern parties in literary studies require an approach grounded in cultural history, drawing on sources that historicise and contextualise the presentation of the fictional festive experience. Moreover, as shown in Chapter 1, a new theoretical framework is needed to read the modern party. Existing models for analysing festivity, such as those proffered by Bakhtin, Caillois, and Turner, do not account for the diversity of parties encountered in Britain's interwar years. Understanding the modern "party consciousness" involves an approach that considers the party's materiality, sociality, spatiality, and subjectivity, elements definitively shaped by historical, social, and cultural contexts.

Chapter 2 demonstrates how parties became an integral literary device in the British comic novel of the 1920s and 1930s. As a prominent and popular mode of sociability, the party offered writers a way to reflect upon and critique society as a greater whole. This critique largely centres upon the mechanisation of society and the individual, a prominent discourse during the early twentieth century. Aligning with a Bergsonian understanding of

¹ For Facebook parties, see Grubb; "Teen Facebook Party." For the cost of contemporary children's birthday parties, see Agostino; Rigby.

laughter, interwar novelists used comedy to comment upon how this rigidity inhibited sociability. Moreover, this comic treatment of the party echoes in the nonfiction of the period, further confirming its dominance as a social form.

For Waugh, Gibbons, Mitford, and Benson, parties offered a way to express the live tensions between tradition and modernity. But for each author, tradition and modernity offered different prospects and disenchantments. As seen in Chapter 3, Waugh's despair at decayed forms of hospitality, characterised through the destruction of the host-guest relationship, manifests in his early satires through a series of parties that offer little pleasure or true amiableness. Conversely, Gibbons champions the potential of modernity to empower and transform the middle-class heroine and reader, encouraging them to see the party as a site for social mobility and aspiration, as is evident in the analysis undertaken in Chapter 4. Mitford, however, takes a more cautious approach to the relationship between parties and social mobility. As Chapter 5 shows, the often nationalistic and largely invented festive experiences encountered by her upper-class characters evidence a desire to strengthen declining class structures, brought on by restorative nostalgia. And yet, by showing the journey's destination to be utterly bathetic, Mitford recognises the impossibility of perfectly recreating the past. Finally, as seen in Chapter 6, Benson creates a village that is deliberately protected from modernity's effects to emphasise the fallacy of his characters' repeated attempts at gaining social and cultural capital.

Reading these writers and their works alongside each other reveals a shared concern about society's progress. The party, acting as a microcosm of these authors' societies, operates as a space to unfold these issues. For Waugh, the loss of systems of order plunges the future into uncertainty, leaving subjects with little genuine feeling or interiority. Gibbons's novels, while decidedly more optimistic in tone, repeatedly engaged with the interwar discourses surrounding civilisation, suggesting the only way to advance was a return to common-sense and middlebrow values—but ones that were personalised and

mediated by each individual. Mitford navigates the question of class by implying matters of refinement are no longer necessarily ingrained, but rather are learned, positioning the aristocracy as a group doomed for failure if they do not get up to date with the times. Benson, valuing readability and accessibility, uses the conventions of the novel series to both create entertainment out of entertainment and bring attention to the frequently excessive ways in which we navigate sociability.

While all four authors critiqued rigid behaviour, they acknowledged that elasticity still had to operate within boundaries of what they perceived as constituting proper and correct conduct. The structures of festivity, then, both uphold and trouble these writers' views. This demonstrates the complexity of sociability in the interwar period, and the frequently contradictory perspectives these writers had towards festivity. Throughout their works, Waugh, Gibbons, Mitford, and Benson find themselves between two conflicting impulses: the desire to allow organic social interaction, but also the recognition that society needs some regulation to shape these interactions.

Each novelist, while taking in the party as a whole, singles out a particular corner of sociability: Waugh's hosts and guests; Gibbons's clothing and appearance; Mitford's settings, interiors, and décor; and Benson's dining and entertainment. As such, they emphasise the centrality of the elements of festivity to studying the party. Only when looking closely at these sorts of elements—the qualities that are essential to any party—do we gain a clearer image of the nature of interwar sociability. When taken together, these different approaches show parties attract numerous concerns among their participants. Parties become not just about social interaction, but about the factors shaping the nature of the social interaction itself: the fluid elements that each individual can manufacture, produce, or change. With this in mind, questions of style and taste are central to all of the authors studied here: what constitutes correct host and guest practices, what clothing and

looks are most civilised, what interior style best suggests finesse, and which dishes and music connote sophistication.

This thesis contributes to the expansion of early twentieth-century literary history in several ways. Firstly, it places the party at its centre to demonstrate how modes of sociability productively function as sites of literary analysis. To study the party is to also consider other interrelated concerns such as affect, class, status, gender, and consumption, and how these influence society and the individual. In doing so, this thesis begins to chart the diverse and complex experiences of modernity beyond those of the modernists, enriching our understanding of interwar fiction. This work reads these novels on their terms, supporting existing scholarship that seeks to broaden critical accounts of 1920s and 1930s writing. Likewise, its focus on leisure and sociability adds to the growing collection of work on interwar pleasure and recreation, such as cinema-going and dancing (see Stead; Zimring). Approaches that combine literary analysis with cultural history offer a means to chart attitudes surrounding social and leisure activities, activities that are liminal and often difficult to otherwise trace. Moreover, the study adds to our understanding of comedy and comic writing of the 1920s and 1930s through sustained analysis of authors who were popular during the interwar period and continue to be read today, but are not often the focus of critical discussions.

There are, of course, some limitations with this analysis. Systems of canonisation and value, for instance, have impacted my selection of authors and novels of study: I was limited to texts that were either still in print or could be feasibly obtained via secondhand copies. Given comedy's often lowly status (as discussed in Chapter 2), the demand for reprints of early twentieth-century comic novels can be low, and first editions legally deposited are rarely available for long-term loan. The experiences of the working class are also underrepresented in this study, given they accounted for seventy-eight percent of the British population in 1931 (McKibbin 106). All of the writers studied in detail here were, at the very

least, comfortably middle class, and wrote primarily about the middle to upper middle classes. Working-class writing is a growing area of interest,² and future research could investigate how proletariat writing of interwar years depicts parties and sociability, particularly given the working class were most affected by the opening up of leisure in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

This thesis establishes the centrality of the party to interwar comic novels, and, by extension, to the interwar period as a whole. Across its chapters, the study explores the range of complex, conflicting, and often contradictory ideas writers of the period associated with the party, a festive form that is emblematic of the tension between tradition and modernity in the early twentieth century. I hope that the approach used here – based in cultural history and attuned to the nuances of the party as a social form – will serve as an invitation to both scholars in modernist and early twentieth-century literature studies, as well as those working across other periods and cultural forms. As the contemporary discourse surrounding parties suggests, parties continue today to generate many of the same tensions, anxieties and concerns, reaffirming their role in how we find, shape, and present our identities within society.

² See, for example: Fox; Goodridge and Keegan; Haywood; Hilliard; Hubble; Rose.

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