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Ten versions of a Wodehouse story

“A Damsel in Distress”, study 1

I. Introduction

In his preface to the new edition of this novel 1975 Wodehouse wrote: *“A Damsel in Distress' has rather an interesting case history. Almost everything happened to it that can happen to a book, short of being done on ice.”*

One of the things that happened was for instance that a condensed “short story” version of the film from 1937 was published in the Swedish magazine Filmjournalen nr 13 1938! In the quest for Wodehouse-texts in Swedish magazines and newspapers which Bengt Malmberg and I (both members of the Wodehouse Society in Sweden) are conducting, I found a copy of this magazine and wanted to learn more about other versions of this story. In this study I describe the versions I know of. There may very well be other versions I don't know of! It would be a joy to add new information to this study! At first I give a few data about the versions and then make some comparisons to see how the story was transformed, by Wodehouse and by others.

II. A story in (at least) ten versions!

1. The **novel** was at first published 1919 as a **serial** in Saturday Evening Post, and later the same year as a **book**. I regard these as the same version. Already 1921 the novel was published in a Swedish translation. This was one of the earliest translations of a Wodehouse book in the world. In 1979 a new translation was made by Birgitta Hammar. I assume that the novel is well known by the reader.
2. A **film** was made already in 1919 by Pathé Interchange with screenplay by Guy Bolton (McCrum 2004, p. 245 and Taves 2006, p. 151). In Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com) and in Taves (2006, p. 151) there is more information about this film. It was a silent movie which means a **very limited dialogue**, presented in title cards between the scenes. Taves wrote *“The 1919 film, at the time of its original publication, had been faithful to the novel.”* (2006, p. 88). Evidently Wodehouse didn't participate at all in writing the screenplay. I don't know if this film is saved in some archive and I have not had the opportunity to see it.

3. In 1924 the film from 1919 was released in a condensed home movie version by Pathé Interchange in France with French text between the scenes. It was called **Mam'zell Milliard**. Thanks to Tony Ring I have got a DVD-copy of Mam'zell Milliard. Unfortunately one of the seven reels is missing. Also this condensed version seems to me faithful to the novel.
4. In 1928 the novel was dramatized into a **theatre play** by Ian Hay and Wodehouse. Jasen tells that Wodehouse and Hay discussed the characters and planned the show together. Then Hay worked out the dialogue. (1975 pp. 114-115). McCrum states that it was Hay who did the transcription (2004, p. 245). Taves writes (2001): "*In 1928 Wodehouse had collaborated with Ian Hay, which had condensed and rearranged some scenes for the limitations of the proscenium, while retaining the highlights of the book.*" In his new preface to the novel (Wodehouse 1975, p. 5) Wodehouse wrote: "*Ian Hay then made a play of it*". Hay is also the first name on the front page of the published play (Hay and Wodehouse, 1930). Richard Burnip (2011) has written a very interesting article about this play and the original set up of it, and also compares it with the novel and with the film from 1937. It was staged at the New Theater in London in August 1928, was a success and was given in 242 performances (Jasen 1979, p. 111, Donaldson 1992, p. 359 and Burnip 2011). I have got a copy of the play and agree that the story is quite close to the novel even if performance at a theatre scene made some changes necessary. Burnip (2011) also tells about other performances of this play as late as 1936.
5. A new **film** was produced in 1937 by Pandro Berman at RKO (Radio-Keith-Orpheum) Pictures. RKO was (according to Wikipedia) one of the five major film companies in Hollywood. Wodehouse had already 1930 worked at M-G-M for a year and just experienced frustration. It did, however, give him material, for instance to the wonderful parody "The Nodder" (Blandings Castle 1935). He returned to Hollywood in the fall 1936. At first he worked for M-G-M again but left them in spring 1937 to work for RKO with "A Damsel in Distress" for 10 weeks (until August 14th). In the film P. G. Wodehouse, Ernest Pagano and P. K. Lauren get credit as screenwriters, in this order. The film has music/lyrics by Wodehouse's friends George and Ira Gershwin, with several well known songs such as 'Nice Work If You Can Get It' and 'A Foggy Day in London Town'. Some characters/ actors: Jerry Halliday/Fred Astaire, Lady Alycia/Joan Fontaine, Jerry's press agent George/George Burns, his secretary Gracie/Gracie Allen, the butler Keggs/Reginald Gardiner, Reggie Byng/Ray Noble, the page Albert/Harry Watson. Astaire, Burns and Allen were the big stars and the film was adapted to them. On the poster for the film their names are written with the same tall letters (see page 10). Wodehouse's name is written further down in very small letters. The film had its Swedish premiere 21/2 1938 with the title "**En flicka i knipa**". The version I have got is an American DVD from WB, released 2010 (Copyright RKO 1937). There is no information about if this DVD contains exactly the same cut that was shown at cinemas in USA or Sweden, but it is an officially released version.
6. November 5, 1937 a one-hour **radio** version based on the film was sent in USA by CBS. Starring were Astaire, Burns and Allen and others (Taves 2006 p. 94). The show was probably sent as a live performance with the artists in the studio. I have had no possibility to check if there were any differences in the dialogue to the film and if some narrative text was added.

7. The December issue of Screen Romances 1937 contained a **condensed version** “*adapted from the RKO-RADIO Film – Directed by GEORGE STEPHENS - From the screenplay by MORRIE RISKIN – Based on the novel by P. G. WODEHOUSE*”. Including photos from the film it is six pages. It is not called a “short story” and the name of the editor of the condensation is not mentioned. In the film P. G. Wodehouse, E. Pagano and Lauren are given credit as screenwriters and IMDb and Taves mentions (p 166) P. J. Wolfson and W. Burns as contributing writers but not Morrie Riskin.
8. Taves (2005 p 88) tells that a **condensed version** of the story also was published in the December issue 1937 of Movie Story Magazine. I have not yet got the possibility to read this version so I can’t tell if it is the same condensation as in Screen Romances.
9. Just a few weeks after the Swedish premiere of the film, a “**short story**” was published in the magazine Filmjournalen (nr 13 1938), with the same Swedish title as the film and with the subtitle: *A short story after the R.K.O. radio movie, which is based on a novel by P. G. Wodehouse*. The “short story” is illustrated with some photos from the film (see page 10). This is not a translation from Screen Romances. I have not yet got the opportunity to check if it is a translation from Movie Story Magazine. Maybe the condensation was made by some editor at the Swedish magazine.
10. George Gershwin had made several songs based on the novel but intended for the 1937 film. All the changes from the novel made some of them unfit for the film and they were dropped. Professor John Mueller at Ohio State University, half a century later got the idea of creating a **stage musical** along the lines George Gershwin had proposed. In the Shaw festival program it says that this musical is based on the Hay/Wodehouse play. With the title “Reaching for the moon” it was 1987 given in 7 performances at Eastman School of Music, NY. In a new rewritten version, with the title “A Foggy Day”, it was given in 261 performances at the Shaw Festival in Ontario, Canada 1998 and 1999, all sold out. (Taves 2006 p 96-97, and Mueller.) I don’t know if there is some recording from this show and I have not been able to study it.

III. Some comparisons between the theatre play and the novel

The plot in the play is quite close to that in the novel, but with some necessary changes. Hay and Wodehouse chose to build the play in three acts and with three different sceneries. **Act 1, scene 1** is taking place in the personal entrance of a theatre. The hiding scene is placed here instead of in a cab. In **Act 1 scene 2** we are moved to Totleigh (not Belfer) Castle. **Act 2** also takes place in the Castle. **Act 3** takes place in a teahouse close to a Registrar’s office in London. In the novel Maud meets her American love (Mr Gray) in the tea house in a short but important chapter. In the play Wodehouse and Hay placed a lot of other meetings and dialog there as well, instead of in the castle. The persons in the play and in the novel are the same (except for Albert who is replaced by Albertina) and their actions and reactions are quite close to the novel. For instance, all three romances in the novel are kept in the play.

The dialogue is naturally the most important ingredient in the play and drives the action forwards. It follows the spirit and style of the novel well but is nevertheless *almost totally rewritten*. Some lines in

the play are close to lines in the novel but also these lines are almost always somewhat reformulated. New lines are added, lines are taken away and lines are changed. This is of course a necessity when all narrative text in the novel must be eliminated in the play. As a matter of fact, I have been able to find just a few lines that are totally unchanged from the novel! There is one scene in the play where a big part of the dialogue is close to that in the novel and has some identical lines. It is the scene in act 3 where Maud meets “her American”, Mr Gray, and after that meets George. The play feels very much as a work by Wodehouse, and Ian Hay, who was responsible for the dialogue really succeeded in keeping it in Wodehouse’s style. Apparently their cooperation worked out very well.

IV. Some comparisons between the 1937 film and the novel

There are **many** and **big** differences between the film and the novel, **much bigger than between the play and the novel!** The film was specially adapted to the big star Fred Astaire and to the comedians George Burns and Gracie Allen which were very popular at that time. Taves (2006, pp. 89-93) gives a very good and exhaustive report of the changes in the story between the film and the novel and I will just point at some differences and similarities in the plot and in the dialogue.

At first I must mention that some names have been changed. For instance:

The novel

Belpher Castle

Lady Maud, female lead

George Bevan, male lead, a composer

The film

Totleigh Castle (as in the play)

renamed to Lady Alycia

renamed to Jerry Halliday, a dancer (Astaire)

In the following I will use the names from the film.

The plot of the film is substantially changed from novel. Here are some examples:

- The sweepstake among the servants about who lady Alycia will marry is the starting scene in the film. Keggs and Albert are more important characters in the film than they are in the novel. Albert, for instance, in the film writes a false love letter from Alycia to Jerry. In the novel her brother Percy is watching Alycia in London, when she jumps into Jerry’s cab. In the film he is replaced by Keggs. Keggs character is a merger between Keggs and Percy in the novel.
- Many chapters in the novel are completely removed. Some characters are removed, for instance miss Billie Dore (a friend of Jerry), miss Faraday (lord Marshmoreton’s secretary) and Alycia’s brother Percy. Thus the secondary romances in the novel between lord Marshmoreton and Miss Dore and between Reggie Byng and Miss Faraday are removed.
- In the novel there is a key scene at the end when Alycia meets her American poet. She finds that his whole personality is totally changed. This scene is omitted in this film and Alycia just forgets her poet and falls in love with Jerry instead.
- There are many additions in the film, both of new characters and of new scenes. To make room for the comedians George Burns and Gracie Allen, Jerry has been provided with a press agent with a secretary. The three of them rent a cottage in the neighborhood of the castle and visit the castle

together while Jerry does this alone in the novel. George without hesitation feeds the press with untrue information about invented love affairs of Jerry just to get headlines, which causes trouble between Alycia and Jerry.

- In the film there are of course a large number of song and dance scenes with Fred Astaire in top form. Many dance numbers are performed by Fred Astaire, George Burns and Gracie Allen together. The choreographer Hermes Pan received an Academy Award (an Oscar) in 1937 for Best Dance Direction for this film.

Some key scenes are kept from the novel (but with changes), for instance:

- The film begins with the sweepstake among the staff about who Alycia will marry. In the novel Alfred just tells Jerry (and the readers) about this event (Chapter 11). Keggs is cheating and pulls the ticket with the name of the favorite Reggie just as in a novel.
- Alycia jumps into Jerry's cab in London to hide and Jerry falls in love (Chapter 2-4 in the novel). In the novel she hides from her brother Percy. Percy gets his hat knocked off by Jerry, then gets in trouble with a policeman and has to spend the night in jail. In the film Percy is replaced by Keggs. (In the play this scene takes place in the theatre entrance.)
- Jerry escapes, with help from Albert, from the balcony of Alycia's chamber to avoid compromising her (Chapter 13 in the novel). In the film he escapes from Lady Caroline, in the novel (and the play) from a suitor to Alycia, Mr Plummer (a person who does not occur in the film).
- Keggs uses blackmail to exchange lottery ticket with Albert when he discovers that Alycia is in love with Jerry and that Albert's ticket is likely to be the winning one (Chapter 14 in novel).
- Lord Marshmoreton, Lady Caroline and others misinterpret the situation and believe that Jerry is Alycia's secret love and the lord makes a visit to Jerry in his cottage to have a talk. In the novel he is sympathetic to Jerry but feels at first forced to persuade him to leave Alycia alone, but in the film he encourages him all the way.
- Jerry kisses Alycia, misled by lord Marshmoreton and Albert to believe that he is the American she is in love with, and is completely unprepared for her blunt reaction (Chapter 18-19 in the novel). In the film this takes place in the love tunnel at an amusement park, not in the castle. Big show numbers with Astaire, Burns and Allen also take place in this amusement park.

The dialogue in the film is also very much changed. A lot of dialog in the novel have disappeared when scenes and characters are removed, but also in those scenes that are kept the dialogue is usually pretty changed. Some lines can however be recognized from the novel. Michael Skupin (1999) gave a very positive review of the film and said: *"Comparison of the plot of the movie with that of the novel is interesting, but I do not propose to treat it in detail; suffice it to say that characters are merged, the story line and motivations are radically different, but the dialogue is largely intact. Sometimes a phrase will occur in the mouth of a different character from the original, but it is still there. A study of the nuts and bolts of the transfer from the printed page to the silver screen would be a fruitful one, but I leave it for another day."* I have played the film many times, one scene at a time and compared them with the novel (and with the play, and with the short story), and I find it hard to agree with Skupin that the dialogue is "largely intact". There are a few pretty intact original lines in some key scenes. In the "cab scene" for instance, some dialogue between Jerry and Alycia are retained from the novel and also some dialogue between Jerry and Keggs (but in the novel it is between George and Percy). Those key scenes with some original lines are however only a small part of the film.

New characters and new scenes with new story mean additions of a lot of **new dialogue**. This especially applies to all the scenes with George Burns and Gracie Allen. Most gags are put in the mouth of Gracie. Wodehouse said in an interview about her: “*She’s one of the funniest women I’ve ever met.*” (McCrum 2004, p. 247 and Taves 2006, p. 91). Here are some examples of new dialogue for them:

* The phone is ringing. The secretary Gracie answers and the press agent George asks who it is.

Gracie: It’s a Hawaiian.

George: A Hawaiian?

Gracie: Well, he must be. He says he’s brown from morning sun.

...

George: Tell him I’m not in!

Gracie: He’s not in! If you don’t believe me you can ask him yourself!

* Jerry: Thursday is visitor’s day. What’s the day?

Gracie: I don’t know.

George: You can tell if you look at that newspaper.

Gracie: This is no help George! Yesterday’s paper.

* George: Totleigh castle is the seat of the earl.

Gracie: You have to do something about that Brooklyn accent! You mean oil.

George: I mean Earl. Your daddy doesn’t go to bed oily, does he?

Gracie: He did when he worked for the gas station!

We can assume that these and other lines are tailor-made for Burns and Allen. Taves wrote: “*While their participation was definitely outside the original, and the humor different from the Wodehouse style, Burns and Allen provide the picture with needed additional amusement.*” (2006, p. 90). Who wrote the lines for these comedians, like the lines in the examples above? They are funny, but are typical Wodehouse humor? Like Taves I have doubts about some of the gags. But credit is given in the film also to two other screenwriters.

McCrum writes (2004, p. 247): “*Wodehouse’s screenplay basically followed the plot of the novel, but merged or dropped many of its characters, so that the film bears only a passing resemblance to the original.*” Note McCrum’s opinion that it was “Wodehouse’s screenplay” even if it was heavily revised! Taves (2001) also regards it as a Wodehouse work: “*Like the Ian Hay stage version, A Damsel in Distress retained the basic plot outline of the novel, but unlike the play, the movie deleted and merged a number of characters, and added others, becoming a second, separate Wodehouse variation on the novel.*”

In mid August 1937 Wodehouse wrote in a letter to Leonora: “*I finish my job on the ‘Damsel in distress’ tomorrow, after ten weeks all but two days, . . .*” I only expected to get a couple of weeks polishing the existing script. But that script turned out so badly that they threw it away, and I and another man started doing a new picture from the bottom up, following the story of the book pretty closely. But much better is the fact that I have really come across with some good stuff, . . .” It was a very pleasant job as I was working under a producer, Pandro Berman, who really has got intelligence,

taste and everything. I think the picture is going to be good.”. . .”I think I have made a big hit in my work on this picture.” (Wodehouse 1990, p. 69).

It is likely that Wodehouse was the main screenwriter, also to new scenes, and to at least some new dialogue. The sentence *“I have really come across with some good stuff”* in the letter to Leonora reasonably refers to new scenes and new lines. But, as Burnip (2011) notes : *“Wodehouse was one of several (credited and uncredited) writers who worked on the script, neither the first nor the last;”* An interesting question is to try to evaluate how much of the film that can be regarded as a work by Wodehouse. Another most interesting question is what happened to the script during the five weeks between August 16th, when Wodehouse left the work, and September 25th when the script was finished. These questions are addressed in the study *“Why did Wodehouse change his mind about the film?”*.

V. Some comparisons between the 1937 film and the 1928 theatre play

Transformation of narrative text to dialogue was already done in the play, so one could expect Wodehouse to get lines from the play and use them in the film. I have gone through the film scene by scene and compared the lines with those in the play and I can't find that this has been the case, with some exceptions.

- The play is much closer to the novel than the film is. For instance the personal gallery and the three love stories are the same in the play and the novel. In the film some persons are removed and others are added.

- The hiding scene in the film takes place in a cab like in the novel, but with Percy exchanged to Keggs. In the play it is the same persons as in the novel but the place is changed. Some lines in this scene in the film are close to the play, and to the novel. I noted one line with a joke that was added in the play and also remains in the film.

- The film is a sort of musical, with a lot of song and dance scenes. The play has nothing of that.

- When there are similar lines between the film and the play, they usually come from the novel. I can imagine that this depends on that some key scenes in the novel were kept in both the play and the film. There is great similarity between the plots in the play and the novel. The plot in the film differs from both.

I can't find any evident signs of that the play was an important source for Wodehouse when writing the screenplay to the film.

VI. His change of opinion

Wodehouse in 1975 wrote a new preface to a new edition of the novel. In this he gave a very negative judgment on the film. He meant that the production was in hands of *“hired assassins”* and *“manglers”*. He wrote *“The result was a Mess . . . The first thing they did was to eliminate the story and substitute for it one more suitable for retarded adults and children with water on the brain.”. . .“It might be supposed that after all this I should find it difficult to re-read A Damsel in Distress with the enthusiasm which I bring to some of my old ones, but this is not so. I tell myself that this is not its fault that it was*

made a hissing and a byword, and you will frequently find me curled up with it. 'Darned god stuff' I say to myself." (Wodehouse 1975, pp. 5-6 and Green 1981, p. 178).

He didn't mention one word about his own involvement in the film and the screenplay! How come? Is there any truth in his accusations? I have looked into this question in the study: "Why did Wodehouse change his mind about the film?".

VII. A short comparison between the short story in Filmjournalen and the 1937 film

There is no information about who made the condensation to the short story in Filmjournalen. It is quite another version than the one in Screen Romances, much more close to the film, so it is not a translation or adaptation based on that. Such short story versions of films with pictures were quite common in this Swedish magazine. The question about how much of Wodehouse there is in this short story is the object for the study "The short story 'En flicka i knipa' How much of it is by Wodehouse?". Here follows a short summary.

The plot in the short story follows the film pretty well. It is of course very condensed and the condensation is focused on the key scenes. Other scenes are excluded or related in summary. A few characters have been excluded. Gracie Allen doesn't appear at all in the short story. (Nor has her character any greater importance for the basic plot in the film, she is just a funny character.) Reggie Byng doesn't either appear in the short story (and he is an insignificant character in the film). All "show numbers", with song and dance are of course removed.

Those scenes in the film which are retained from the novel are more dominating in the short story than in the film so the short story seems to me closer to the novel than the film is!

There are some deviations in the short story that are remarkable because they cannot be explained as condensation. They are just changes of the story. For instance:

- In the short story lady Alyce tells Jerry that the reason for her interest for the American poet was just a wish to tease Lady Caroline! **This explanation is unique for the short story!**

- In the sweepstake scene in the short story there are added a few lines between Keggs and a Mrs. Rummit. **This lady does not appear in the film or the novel!**

These deviations can indicate that the author of the short story based it on some other material than the released film!

The Dialogue dominates in the short story and is very much shortened compared to the film. For instance, all dialogue between George and Gracie is excluded. There is not much dialogue left from the **novel**, but most of it disappeared already in the film. The few lines that were kept from the novel in the film, mostly remains also in the short story.

VIII. Some final comments

Two other Wodehouse novels have been published in Swedish magazines, condensed to short stories: “Uncle Dynamite” and “Ring for Jeeves”. Unlike “En flicka i knipa” they were not based on films. More about them can be found on the homepage www.wodehousebibliografier.n.nu.

Two works by Wodehouse have been filmed in Sweden with Swedish directors, screenwriters and actors. (Taves 2006, pp. 168 -170). **Both were very much changed from the originals:**

-“Blixt och dunder” (literally “Lightning and thunder”) from 1938 was based on the novel “Summer Lightning” from 1929.

-“Gomorrön Bill” from 1945 was based on the play “Good Morning Bill” from 1927/1934.

In another Swedish film: “Den ofrivillige golfaren” (literally “The involuntary golfer”) from 1991, credit is given to Wodehouse’s golf stories for inspiration (Taves 2006 p. 198).

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(Thanks Elin Woodger-Murphy for sending me the articles from *Wooster Sauce* and *Plum Lines*!)

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