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*The Importance of Being Earnest*

*The Importance of Being Earnest*, Oscar Wilde's most famous and – posthumously – most successful play, was first produced by George Alexander at the St James's Theatre on 14 February 1895. London was enduring a prolonged and severe spell of cold weather: several theatres advertised their steam-heating among the attractions of their programme, and the first night of Wilde's comedy had been put off from 12 February because several of the women in the cast had bad colds.<sup>1</sup> In addition to the habitual glamour of a first night at a fashionable theatre, the occasion was especially interesting because Wilde was in vogue. *An Ideal Husband* had been playing at the Haymarket Theatre since 3 January, and at the same theatre *A Woman of No Importance* had completed a successful run, having opened on 19 April 1893. On 20 February 1892 *Lady Windermere's Fan* had been the second play staged by Alexander's new management at the St James's Theatre, running until 26 July of that year.

Wilde's spectacular début in the early 1880s had been followed by a period of less glamorous work as a reviewer, editor and jobbing author for journals and magazines. In 1888 he published *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*. In 1891 he had published four books, including *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Intentions*. Now, a decade after his appearance on the London literary scene, he was a successful West End dramatist and was beginning to seem a more substantial figure. A book-length lampoon, *The Green Carnation*, by imitating (perhaps reporting) his style of conversation, contributed to his renewed prominence in the literary and social gossip columns.<sup>2</sup> To some readers it may also have suggested – or confirmed – the impression that there was a less positive side to Wilde's notoriety.

For his part, George Alexander was a rising theatrical star. He had gone into management in 1889 after establishing himself during a stint with Henry Irving's company at the Lyceum. In 1891 he had taken the St James's Theatre, where he remained until his death in 1915. He was knighted in 1911. Alexander's theatre was run meticulously. His biographer, the play-

wright and novelist A. E. W. Mason, described Alexander's work on one of his own plays. The manager went through the script line by line and move by move, interrogating him rigorously on every sentence, and planning moves with a toy theatre stage. Then a ground cloth was marked with the lines of walls and exits and for three weeks there were daily rehearsals, beginning each day punctually at eleven and finishing at two, until for the last four days there were morning and afternoon sessions, culminating in two dress-rehearsals. The management's attention to detail in staging and performance was thorough: Lady Alexander described how on a first night she would sit in her box 'sick with anxiety' and then between the acts 'I used to put on an apron and go behind the scenes to place all the little things on the stage myself until the men got used to it. I arranged the flowers; in those days we had so much detail, and I loved to make things look real. I ordered the gowns to suit the decorations of the scene so that nothing clashed or was ugly. Alec gave me the large sum of £5 a week for my work, and I think I was very cheap at the price.'<sup>3</sup>

This was a theatre as well ordered as a drawing-room, with acting and staging whose quality was achieved with the expenditure of immense craft and care but which never drew attention to the effort it required. Its first nights seemed (wrote Lady Alexander) 'like brilliant parties', although they were not so exclusive as to be without the gallery audience, who guarded jealously their privilege of expressing immediate and vocal judgement on what was put on stage. The atmosphere of a fashionable occasion combined with the reminder of a wider public's existence was always there. 'Everybody knew everybody,' wrote Lady Alexander, 'everybody put on their best clothes, everybody wished us success. When I entered my box on a first night I always had a reception from the gallery. They were always so pleased and so kind to me.'<sup>4</sup> They were also quite capable of booing Henry James's *Guy Domville*: the West End theatres were never completely insulated from society with a small 's', and it is a mistake to think of them as playing to a homogeneous middle- and upper-class audience. The masses and the classes were not wholly separated, even though theatre architects did their best by providing separate entrances and box-offices.

It might never have appeared so in public, but Wilde resembled Alexander in his approach to work. Their temperaments were dissimilar in other respects, but both were scrupulous, laborious artists. Wilde liked to give the impression that words flowed easily from his pen, but this was part of a strategy for undermining assumptions about the seriousness of art. In fact, his new 'Trivial Comedy for Serious People' (or, in earlier drafts, 'serious comedy for trivial people') was proposed in outline to George Alexander in July 1894, drafted in August and assiduously revised and polished during

the autumn. Alexander had not taken it up at first, and Wilde placed it with Charles Wyndham, who had not so far staged any of his plays. In the event *The Importance of Being Earnest* came to the St James's when the failure of Henry James's *Guy Domville* made a replacement necessary. (Unable to face his own first night, James had tried to distract himself by going to see *An Ideal Husband* at the Haymarket.) In the course of rehearsal, among other adjustments to the text, Alexander insisted that the play be reduced from four to three acts. This is the best-known and most radical alteration made between the first draft and the first night, but Wilde had revised every sequence, most speeches and almost every sentence over the past six months.

Some of the changes might seem trivial in themselves, but in a play so economical in its language and effects, they had a serious consequence. Thus, Wilde considered several variations of the title of Dr Chasuble's sermon, which was given for benefit of a charity described at one time or another as the Society for the Prevention of 'Cruelty to Children' (a real organisation, and therefore not really suitable), 'Discontent among the Higher Orders' and, in the page-proofs of the 1899 edition, 'Discontent among the Lower Orders'. Wilde finally altered this to 'Discontent among the Upper Orders', restoring a topsy-turvy joke of a kind familiar in the play (II, 249–50).<sup>5</sup>

Sometimes in an early manuscript draft one finds the bare bones of a speech later developed and made specific to its speaker and the situation. Thus Wilde produced the following (I, 130–2):

O! it is absurd to have a hard-and-fast rule about what one should read and one shouldn't. More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn't read.

from this (manuscript draft):

One should read everything. That is the true basis of modern culture. More than half of modern culture depends on the unreadable.

In the first edition (1899) Jack declares to Gwendolen:

Miss Fairfax, ever since I met you I have admired you more than any girl – I have ever met since – I met you. (I, 385–6)

The faltering is carefully indicated by Wilde with inserted dashes. The earliest draft of the speech makes it a self-consciously clever and confident sentence, with a play on words that depends on emphasis:

Miss Fairfax, ever since I *met* you I have admired you more than any girl I have ever met since I met *you*.

Among the multitude of similar tinkerings is one which seems puzzling. When Lady Bracknell is told that Jack has lost both his parents, the earliest manuscript draft of the complete act has her react as follows:

Both? ... To lose one parent may be considered a misfortune. To lose both seems like carelessness. (I, 539–40)

It seems likely that in 1895 the line was spoken thus:

Both? To lose one parent may be regarded as a misfortune, to lose *both* seems like carelessness.

This was the version of the line printed in the page-proofs for the first edition: Wilde changed it to

Both? – that seems like carelessness.

As if this were not puzzling enough, Robert Ross, in the first collected edition of Wilde's works, printed yet another variation:

Both? To lose one parent, Mr Worthing, may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness.

Wilde's alteration and Ross's emendation have yet to be explained.

This fine tuning is part of a process that Wilde was careful to conceal beneath the image of an artist who worked by inspiration and *sprezzatura*, composing almost in spite of himself. He was a master of what would now be called media opportunities. His epigrammatic, paradoxical utterances made for effective publicity, *fin-de-siècle* sound-bites. The vigorous world of the expanding and increasingly illustrated popular press gave scope for interviews, paragraphs in gossip columns, glimpses of celebrities 'at home', cartoons, parodies, reports of speeches (especially first-night speeches) and lectures. Wilde made great play with the boundary between public and private personality, affecting a kind of lofty intimacy which tantalised journalists and their public. He was always good copy, never at a loss for words and frequently trod a narrow path between effrontery and reserve. In an interview with Robert Ross, published on 18 January 1895, Wilde answers the tentative enquiry, 'I dare not ask, I suppose, whether [the play] will please the public?' with a splendidly definitive statement:

When a play that is a work of art is produced on the stage, what is being tested is not the play, but the stage; when a play that is *not* a work of art is produced on the stage what is being tested is not the play, but the public.<sup>6</sup>

Such a 'personality', effortlessly generating publicity, was in one sense a godsend to Alexander, but there was another side to Wilde's presentation of

himself. It is clear from some reviews of the plays that Wilde was thought to have intruded himself, to be passing off 'false' wit as 'true' (by Victorian definitions).<sup>7</sup> Some critics used the word 'impertinence' ominously and equivocally to describe both the style and the author. In February 1895 more than one critic wondered whether the fashion for Wilde's paradoxical, epigrammatic wit would survive. However pleasing *The Importance of Being Earnest* might be (and even the sourest reviewers could not ignore its success with audiences), would the new style continue to appeal to the public?

*The Importance of Being Earnest* has, of course, prevailed. It is one of the few plays from its period to remain in theatrical repertoires, outlasting most of the trivial and almost all the serious works of Wilde's contemporaries. W. S. Gilbert has barely survived without Sullivan's support, Arthur Wing Pinero's farces from the 1880s are far more commonly seen than the later work he set most store by, plays by Henry Arthur Jones have received only a few revivals, and such erstwhile celebrities as Haddon Chambers and Sydney Grundy have sunk without trace. From the theatres of the nineties, only the plays of Wilde and Shaw have consistently held the stage, together with Brandon Thomas's farce *Charley's Aunt* (1892). Of Wilde's own plays, it is *The Importance of Being Earnest* which has enjoyed most revivals.

If Wilde were here now he might well express surprise at posterity's behaviour. As far as he was concerned, *The Importance of Being Earnest* was not the culmination, and of course not at all the conclusion, of a dramatic career. He was anxious to write a more serious play, also sketched in the summer of 1894, and when he first broached the subject of the new comedy to Alexander (asking for an advance of £150) he referred to it as his response to an American impresario's request for a play 'with no real serious interest'. This attitude to *The Importance of Being Earnest* persisted in his letters to Alexander during the autumn, Wilde declaring that it would probably be unsuitable for the more serious repertoire the manager was establishing for the St James's company and wished to take with him on a projected American tour.<sup>8</sup> Wilde's Society plays before *The Importance of Being Earnest* can be seen as a series of experiments, determinedly distorting familiar dramatic situations. This new play seems an excursion – a day-trip into a less demanding, less adventurous kind of theatre. Certainly it appeared so to a number of reviewers, especially those who regarded the unevenness of the earlier plays as signs of Wilde's inadequate grasp of the essentials of construction and character. *The Importance of Being Earnest* lacks not only the 'serious' plot devices of the other Society plays, but also the grandiloquent speeches with which the characters rise to serious subjects in moments of crisis. When we approach *The Importance of Being Earnest*

as his first audiences did, from experience of Wilde's previous West End plays and his perceived characteristics as a writer, it seems remarkable for a number of omissions and deviations from what might be expected.

Three figures prominent in Wilde's previous dramatic work are absent. The new comedy lacks a 'woman with a past' like the active and defiant Mrs Erylne or Mrs Cheveley, or the wronged and repentant Mrs Arbuthnot. (Miss Prism does not emerge as a comic variation on this theme until the final scenes.) In fact, the past in this play has become a benign rather than a menacing secret, with the handbag concealing not a 'social indiscretion' but an absurd mistake. Female culpability (a mainspring even of the 'advanced' serious drama of the time) is limited to absent-mindedness. An audience in February 1895 might also have expected a dandyish aristocrat of Wilde's particular kind – either dubiously charming like Darlington in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, villainous like Illingworth in *A Woman of No Importance* or nonchalantly virtuous like Goring in *An Ideal Husband*. Both Algernon and Jack (in his London mode) lead lives of cultivated pointlessness, and both are given to making authoritative statements on all aspects of modern life and culture (so, for that matter are Gwendolen, Cecily and Lady Bracknell) but neither of the men is a villain or a *raisonneur*. Like the stories of the plays in which Wilde had so far used them, the woman with a past and the dandy were Wildean revisions of the stock devices, and a playgoer might expect that a new play by him would continue to exploit this vein. The third stock figure that *The Importance of Being Earnest* lacks is the innocently idealistic young woman, forced to confront the sordid realities of political and social life – Hester Worsley in *A Woman of No Importance*, or Lady Windermere and Lady Chiltern, all of them gifted with a kind of rhetoric that it is hard to believe the author took seriously. Again, the new play transforms a type, in this instance by making idealism consist in wanting to marry a man called Ernest, and self-righteous indignation is briefly mocked when the two girls declare that they have been deceived by Jack and Algernon.

Another quality associated with Wilde in the early 1890s is also notably absent: self-conscious 'decadence'. *Salomé* (published but refused a performance licence) combined oriental exoticism with perverse passions. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* had confirmed the association of his name with the luxuriant description of unusual and refined artistic tastes, and the theme of a younger man seduced intellectually and aesthetically (and perhaps implicitly, sexually) by an older mentor. In his critical dialogues, 'The Critic as Artist' and 'The Decay of Lying', aesthetic discrimination is associated with luxurious surroundings and the idea of persuasive talk among men. Persuasion and conviction are central to the fictional 'Portrait of Mr W. H.'. One

of the real dangers of *The Green Carnation* – given Wilde’s personal situation in 1894 – was its suggestion of such a relationship between the Wilde figure and a young man. In the first two West End plays there is relatively little of this element – at least on the surface, although Gerald Arbuthnot is clearly under the spell of the man who is revealed to be his father. In *An Ideal Husband* the theme is handled explicitly. Sir Robert Chiltern’s wealth and career have been based on a dishonest act committed at the instance of a sinister international financier, Baron Arnheim. Chiltern describes Arnheim’s influence in terms redolent of the corruption of Dorian Gray by Lord Henry Wotton:

I remember so well how, with a strange smile on his pale, curved lips, he led me through his wonderful picture gallery, showed me his tapestries, his enamels, his jewels, his carved ivories, made me wonder at all the strange loveliness of the luxury in which he lived; and then told me that luxury was nothing but a background, a painted scene in a play, and that power, power over other men, power over the world, was the one thing worth having, the one supreme pleasure worth knowing, the joy one never tired of, and that in our century only the rich possessed it.<sup>9</sup> (CW 537)

This overtly ‘decadent’ vein (toned down in the revision of *An Ideal Husband*) is entirely absent from the farce. As if to draw attention to the missing element, a contemporary parody in *Punch* by a friend of Wilde makes a joke of infusing the new play with decadence. Ada Leverson’s ‘The Advisability of not Being Brought Up in a Hand-Bag’ features ‘Dorian’, described in the cast-list as ‘a button-hole’:

ALGY: (*eating cucumber-sandwiches*). Do you know, Aunt Augusta, I am afraid I shall not be able to come to your dinner to-night, after all. My friend Bunbury has had a relapse, and my place is by his side.

AUNT AUGUSTA: (*drinking tea*). Really, Algy! it will put my table out dreadfully. And who will arrange my music?

DORIAN: I will arrange your music, Aunt Augusta. I know all about music. I have an extraordinary collection of musical instruments. I give curious concerts every Wednesday in a long latticed room, where wild gipsies tear mad music from little zithers, and I have brown algerians who beat monotonously upon copper drums. Besides, I have set myself to music. And it has not marred me. I am still the same. More so, if anything.

(*Punch*, 2 March 1895, p. 107)

Although it is arguable that there are coded references to the homosexual double life of its author in the play, nothing of the overtly *Dorian* mode is to be found in the finished work or its drafts.<sup>10</sup> Algernon’s rooms may be ‘luxuriously and artistically furnished’, but he never speaks anything

remotely resembling the language of decadence. His debts are the conventional attribute of the stage man about town. The manuscript draft of the first act seems to suggest that Wilde thought of making the need for a fortune into a motivation for Algernon's pursuit of Jack's young ward – although this was not followed up and the hint was soon removed.<sup>11</sup> (Interestingly, this would have made the play more like Gilbert's cynical comedy *Engaged*, with its principal characters avidly pursuing money while spouting the rhetoric of love.)

The opening scene of the four-act version has Algernon besieged in Half-Moon Street by creditors (represented eventually simply by the letters Lane hands him in the first scene), and in a sequence subsequently cut from the second act a solicitor pursues him to the country to arrest him for a debt of £762.14s.2d. for dinners at the Savoy Hotel. ('There can be little good in any young man who eats so much, and so often', says Miss Prism). In the light of what became public knowledge a few weeks later, Wilde's reference to the Savoy seems like sailing perilously close to the wind, and the author's own imprisonment lent a sad irony to Algernon's protest against being taken to Holloway: 'Well I really am not going to be imprisoned in the suburbs for having dined in the West End.'<sup>12</sup> Elsewhere in the play as performed and published, only the defiantly unconventional use of the words 'immoral' and 'moral' echoes the deliberate flouting of conventional rules that marks Dorian and his mentor in Wilde's novel.

It can be argued that Wilde had already transposed apprehension about his own situation into the safer, specifically political misdemeanour of Chiltern in *An Ideal Husband*, written a year before *The Importance of Being Earnest* in the autumn of 1893 but not produced on stage until 1895. Like Dorian Gray, Sir Robert Chiltern has a history that is concealed – in this case, specifically from his wife, who has an inflated sense of his character as a sort of chivalric ideal. (She even quotes Tennyson: 'We needs must love the highest when we see it.') The ideal husband is threatened with a non-sexual version of the kind of blackmail that Wilde had already encountered, when Mrs Cheveley tries to secure his ministerial backing for a fraudulent share issue and reminded him of the gutter press: 'Think of the hypocrite with his greasy smile penning his leading article, and arranging the foulness of the public placard' (CW 529).

*The Importance of Being Earnest* effects an altogether less ominous transformation of guilt, secrecy and the double life: it enables two young men to 'get into scrapes'. Confession and absolution are sublimely easy. When Algernon arrives in the country as Ernest he tells Cecily that he is not really wicked at all.

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If you are not, then you have certainly been deceiving us all in a very inexcusable manner. I hope you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time. That would be hypocrisy. (II, 122–4)

In the final scene Jack has to ask Gwendolen if she can forgive him for not having been deceitful after all:

JACK: Gwendolen, it is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth. Can you forgive me?

GWENDOLEN: I can, for I feel that you are sure to change. (III, 478–80)

However, any biographical interpretation one might wish to put on these passages should be qualified by the consideration that they parody a familiar feature of the approach to marriage: when a man proposed he was expected to confess the peccadilloes of his bachelor life, for which he would be forgiven by his intended. Like Lady Bracknell's memorable interrogation of Jack in Act I, the dialogue between Jack and Gwendolen is part of the play's systematic guying of the conventional etiquette of love and marriage.

This points to one of the play's great attractions, and one of the principal reasons for its continuing appeal. Wilde simultaneously engaged with and mocked the forms and rules of Society. His stance as a dandy, a performer and (as an Irishman) an outsider gave him a particular use for the machinery and conventions both of the social world and of the Society drama of the theatre, which gave fictional expression to its values by dwelling on stories of fallen and falling women, reinforcing social and sexual discriminations, showing the righteous but hard consequences of maintaining ideals, and endorsing the cruel and absolute exclusion of those who erred. This is a subject matter *The Importance of Being Earnest* shares with the earlier plays, but now the spirit of Society's authoritative exclusiveness is analysed in the most satisfying way Wilde had yet devised, in its most absolute and at the same time funniest embodiment: Lady Bracknell.

Lady Bracknell's unwavering dogmatism was reinforced as the play's dialogue was worked on. It is in fact impossible to discuss the play's treatment of authority – its politics, in fact – without considering the style of the speakers. Style in this (as in all serious matters) is of the utmost importance. A tiny example is the immediacy with which, gravely shaking her head, Lady Bracknell pronounces 149 Belgrave Square to be on the unfashionable side (I, 529). In earlier versions she had first consulted a red book, but the omission of this detail makes it clear that even her knowledge of street and house numbers is encyclopedic, definitive and (most important) immediately accessible. She is easily – as well as loftily – magisterial.

In this scene, as throughout the play, all the details of Lady Bracknell's

draconian social discriminations are underpinned by her frankly mercenary approach to life and – in particular – marriage. Performers of the role have sometimes intimated that Lady Bracknell has herself clambered to the social position she enjoys, especially when she has been cast younger than is commonly the case. Judi Dench, in Peter Hall's 1982 production for the National Theatre, made it clear that she had a lively interest in young men: she patted the seat invitingly for Jack to sit near her as she took notes of his social and financial qualifications, but drew back (and tore up the notes) as she learned of his obscure parentage. Edith Evans's performance in Anthony Asquith's 1952 film has coloured public perception of this scene to the extent that, like *Hamlet*, *The Importance of Being Earnest* now includes a speech – in fact, two words – which audiences are likely to utter before the performer can speak. However, the 'build' of the sequence is really towards Jack's desperately specific 'The Brighton Line' and Lady Bracknell's amazed retort, 'The line is immaterial', followed by her homily on the possible significance of such a situation:

Mr Worthing, I confess I feel somewhat bewildered by what you have just told me. To be born, or at any rate bred, in a hand-bag, whether it had handles or not, seems to me to display a contempt for the ordinary decencies of family life that reminds one of the worst excesses of the French Revolution. And I presume you know what that unfortunate movement led to? As for the particular locality in which the hand-bag was found, a cloak-room at a railway station might serve to conceal a social indiscretion – has probably, indeed, been used for that purpose before now – but it could hardly be regarded as an assured basis for a recognized position in good society.

(1, 568–80)

Wilde packed into this speech Lady Bracknell's basic social assumptions ('the ordinary decencies of family life . . . social indiscretion . . . a recognized position in good society'), an absurd political and historical reference ('the worst excesses of the French Revolution'), and a breathtakingly magisterial manner (in calling the Revolution 'that unfortunate movement'). Stylistically, the sense of authority in the speech is supported by the movement of the last sentence from comic particulars, through a brief parenthetical reflection ('has probably, indeed . . .') towards the resounding invocation of an unanswerable principle. Like the elaborate patterns of Elizabethan dramatic writing, this passage moves forward from thesis to antithesis, giving a sense of absorbing and containing all possible considerations along the way. It is assertive by restraint, which is the key to Lady Bracknell's manner, and the ease of utterance she shares with other characters echoes a characteristic of Wilde's own social talk which struck W. B. Yeats: he seemed to speak in complete sentences.

It appears that the first production achieved the assurance and poise – and lack of self-conscious comic effect – that the play requires. Interestingly, none of the reviews imply that Lady Bracknell was a ‘star’ part. Alexander himself was demure, Allan Aynesworth debonair and stylish. Although some of the stage-business that Alexander attached to the play was more farcical than is indicated in the published text of 1899, the play’s relative lack of strenuous physical action must have been apparent. Although the presence (and violent consumption) of food is typical of farce, there is no knockabout. The finest visual effect is achieved by Jack’s slow entrance in full mourning, upstage – a moment at which (according to one actor) the first-night audience’s laughter told Wilde that the plot point had been achieved. At the end Jack rummages upstairs for the handbag and ransacks bookshelves to find the army lists that will disclose his father’s name, but the vehement heaping of sugar lumps into tea-cups and aggressive slicing of cake are the most violent action of the play’s second act. In places, notably the opening of the third act, comic repetitions make the dialogue resemble a comic opera libretto. ‘The story’, said the *Times* reviewer of the first production, was ‘almost too preposterous to go without music.’ W. H. Auden commented on the ‘pure verbal opera’ of the dialogue, and other critics have compared the play’s formality to that of dance.<sup>13</sup>

In approaching the condition of opera – transforming late-Victorian farce into something resembling *Così fan tutte* – Wilde was on dangerous ground. The self-conscious artificiality of the play, which has reminded some critics of De Musset and Marivaux, was a quality not readily associated with seriousness of purpose in the Victorian theatre. There sincerity, not style, was held to be the guarantor of purposeful laughter. Acknowledging the audience’s presence, and allowing the characters of a play to refer to the drama in which they appear, were commonplace in the burlesque and the comic opera, but not admissible in the ‘new’ modern comedy. Self-consciously patterned dialogue and situations, and the references throughout the play to fictions (from Cecily’s diary to the observation that coincidences do not occur in the best families), make *The Importance of Being Earnest* defiantly artificial. It is Miss Prism, the unwitting vehicle of a benevolent Fate, who insists on the rules of conventional story-telling. In her ‘abandoned’ novel, she tells Cecily, who finds happy endings depressing, ‘The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means’ (II, 54–5).

In the March 1895 issue of *The Theatre* an anonymous reviewer (probably the editor Clement Scott, who was no great admirer of Wilde) remarked on the author’s evident contempt for his own characters – an interesting expression of the idea that a conscientious author should always

appear to believe his own fictions. Like the accusations of impertinently 'false' wit from critics who thought anyone could write Wildean epigrams, this reads like a determined effort to exclude Wilde from the society of the serious dramatic craftsmen. With the new play, Wilde was refusing even to play the game which his opponents declared him to have lost in his earlier work. The passionate statement of ideals, which dramatists like Henry Arthur Jones considered the prerogative (and glory) of their more serious-minded characters, is thoroughly mocked.

Wilde's attack on earnestness undermines not only the well-established 'high moral tone' of Victorian plain living and high thinking (invoked by Chasuble in the omitted scene of Algernon's imminent arrest for debt). It is not simply a contest between Wilde and the sages or the 'serious' religious and social missionaries of his time. Implicitly, he also refuses to join in the earnest struggle for intellectual respectability that marked many of our theatres in the nineties.

'We live, as I hope you know Mr Worthing, in an age of ideals', Gwendolen announces, and proceeds to enunciate the reduction to absurdity of all such notions: that marriage with a man called Ernest can be a goal in life. (Lady Bracknell, of course, later characterises the age as one of surfaces.) Among all the play's other systematic inversions of common values (moral/immoral, serious/trivial, town vice/country virtue and so on) this has a direct bearing on the business of the 'New Drama'. It is more radical than the habitually far-fetched motivations that generate stage farces: positing for example that a young man needs to arrange the impersonation of an aunt from Brazil to chaperone a luncheon-party. Wilde is proposing an absurdly irreverent version of that indispensable item in the moral equipment of the earnest character in a serious play, a 'higher' aspiration. He has had the effrontery to write a farce with young women who are idealists, and to make their ideals appropriately farcical. Hovering over the result are both the eponymous heroine of Pinero's *The Notorious Mrs Ebbsmith* (torn apart by high principles at the St James's the previous year) and Brandon Thomas's *Charley's Aunt* (from Brazil, where the nuts come from).

Wilde's characters both embody and mock dramatic stereotypes: his formidable dowager, sweet *ingénue*, fussy clergyman and scapegrace man about town lead double lives as parodies of themselves. Because the dialogue is comparatively free from puns and racy slang, it has an oddly decorous effect: the toughness and urbanity of Jane Austen, the slyness of George Meredith, but none of the flaunting affectation of Ronald Firbank or even E. F. Benson. Wilde's tactics are also quite different from those of Shaw: his paradoxes are not as confrontational and openly argumentative.

His characters are ruthless in the pursuit of selfish goals and absurd ideals, not combative in the furtherance of the Life-force or social justice. Would Shaw ever allow himself a diminuendo like the end of Wilde's first act?

ALGERNON: I love scrapes. They are the only things that are never serious.

JACK: Oh, that's nonsense, Algy. You never talk anything but nonsense.

ALGERNON: Nobody ever does. (1, 751-5)

Shaw's oddly unamused *Saturday Review* notice, in which he reacted against what he saw as the heartlessness of the play, and insisted it was merely an assemblage of old-fashioned farcical devices, seems to express his apprehension for a style that threatened to supplant his own and would not serve the aims he wished the theatre to adopt. *The Philanderer* (written in 1893) and *Arms and the Man* (staged in April 1894) have something of Wilde's talent for talk, but Shaw's paradoxes and parodies never let the audience lose sight of a purpose.<sup>14</sup> Wilde's seem constantly to undermine the very idea of seriousness.

By adopting farce, with what Kerry Powell characterises as 'aggressive pranks, quick-paced action and evasion of moral responsibility', Wilde was abdicating what many – both conservative and 'advanced' – saw as the responsibility of a dramatist.<sup>15</sup> The proposition that nobody ever does talk anything but nonsense was anathema to Shaw. Wilde announced in an interview before the opening that the play was 'exquisitely trivial, a delicate bubble of fancy', but that it had a philosophy, that 'we should treat all the trivial things of life very seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality'.<sup>16</sup> It is this quality which makes Wilde's play less than tractable to attempts to attach to it various kinds of biographical meaning (that is, being construed as showing an intentional element of self-discovery) while it remains hospitable to all kinds of significance commentators may identify in it. As Alan Sinfield has pointed out, naïvely co-opting Wilde as an ally of gay men a century later is anachronistic.<sup>17</sup> As a conscious contribution to the establishment of a distinctively homosexual literary and theatrical tradition, it seems unconvincing, but seen as a play written by an author whose status as a sexual and social being was precarious, it has a peculiar pathos and dignity. Even if in some quarters 'earnest' was indeed a code-word for homosexual, via 'uraniste', the message hardly seems worth the bottle; but because in general parlance 'earnest' had (and still has) all its deadly Victorian connotations of probity and high-mindedness, then the play's irreverence lives. The claims that Wilde was writing out his Irishness in the double selves of his protagonists are more convincing than the argument for *The Importance of Being Earnest* as a specifically gay play.<sup>18</sup>

Some of the topics spoken of lightly in the play were indeed the subject of earnest debate in the 1890s: the daily papers were full of the Irish Home-Rule question (which underlies the joke of Jack's claim to be a Liberal Unionist). Marriage, education, theology, the fall of the rupee and agricultural depression all get an airing. The gravest social concern invoked is the fear of insurrection. Told that Bunbury was quite exploded, Lady Bracknell exclaims:

Exploded! Was he the victim of a revolutionary outrage? I was not aware that Mr Bunbury was interested in social legislation. If so, he is well punished for his morbidity. (III, 101-4)

If education had any effect in England it might lead to acts of violence in Grosvenor Square, and there is the spectre of the French Revolution. In the wake of events during the 1880s (particularly the Trafalgar Square riot in 1885) and current fears about anarchists and revolutionary socialism – the masses and the classes – these jokes are the 1890s equivalent of references to 'The Bomb' in British plays of the 1950s and 1960s.

In this great farce Wilde distanced himself not only from earnest philistinism, or even earnest high culture, but from the earnest theatre. Those dramatists who were heeding Mathew Arnold's call, 'The theatre is irresistible: organise it!', could find little to support them in this trivial comedy. Wilde was uncomfortably unlike the image of the serious playwright as Jones or Pinero or (in his *outré* way) Shaw promulgated it. His position as an outsider who proclaimed his apartness – the dandy's stance as a leader and mocker of fashion – was dangerously close to that of the theatre itself. Alexander – the son of a tradesman – had risen, like his old chief Henry Irving, to be a leading participant in the fashionable world. He excelled at playing gentlemen, his theatre welcomed gentlemen and ladies and gave the public an image of stylish life; his first nights might (like those of fellow actor-managers) resemble fashionable parties; but he was still a member of a profession whose social standing was only now evolving to the condition of deserving respect by right rather than contract – and not altogether so in some social and, especially, 'earnest' religious circles. Nor were all actors on the same social level as Alexander. Like Markby the solicitor (occasionally seen at dinner parties) or the Liberal Unionists who dine with the Bracknells or at any rate come in the evening, the acting profession did not have an assured place in Society.

In the 1890s dramatists had to choose between working within an 'established' theatre, whose social standing and claim to participate in intellectual life were glamorous but fragile, and a radical theatre of

symbolism and 'Ibsenite' (or Zolaesque) realism. The choice was between fashionable first nights, or earnest matinées – duchesses or dowdies.

Some endeavoured, like Shaw, to practise a form of what in radical politics could be called entryism: working for the Ibsenites among the disadvantaged of St James's. Wilde's participation in the fashionable, 'established' theatre was symptomatic of his refusal to be marginalised and his insistence – at the same time – on keeping his distance from 'Society'. One of the paradoxes of culture is the absorption of rebels into the canon, so that the work of irony becomes a 'classic', fixing and epitomising a style and a whole period. Wilde treated such notions with a mixture of eagerness and scepticism. He would have relished the irony of his most trivial of comedies being a text for examination in schools. 'Fortunately, in England, at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever ...'

#### NOTES

- 1 The fullest account of the circumstances of the first production is given in *Oscar Wilde's 'The Importance of Being Earnest'. A Reconstructive Critical Edition of the Text of the First Production*, ed. Joseph Donohue and Ruth Berggren (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1995).
- 2 *The Green Carnation* was in fact written by Robert Hichens: at one point in the composition of his play Wilde added a reference to it (in the final scene Lady Bracknell is given it by mistake instead of a volume of the Army List). This was later removed.
- 3 A. E. W. Mason, *Sir George Alexander and the St James's Theatre* (London: Macmillan, 1935), pp. 227–8.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 228.
- 5 On the play's composition and subsequent textual history see Donohue and Berggren, *Oscar Wilde's 'The Importance of Being Earnest'*. See also the Introduction and notes to my edition of the play (London: Benn, 1980; fourth impression, revised, 1992). The act and line references in the text relate to this edition of the play. A partial facsimile and full transcript of the earliest manuscript drafts of the four-act version will be found in Sarah Augusta Dickson (ed.), *The Importance of Being Earnest. A Trivial Comedy for Serious People as Originally Written by Oscar Wilde*, 2 vols., (New York: New York Public Library, 1956). In the present chapter references to the early MS drafts are to Dickson's transcription. The various manuscripts and typescripts of the four-act version are examined in Ruth Berggren's edition, *The Definitive Four-Act Version of 'The Importance of Being Earnest'* (New York: Vanguard, 1987).
- 6 Quoted from William Tydeman's collection, *Wilde, Comedies. A Casebook* (London: Macmillan, 1982), p. 41. The interview, with Robert Ross, appeared in the *St James's Gazette* on 18 January 1895.
- 7 On Victorian definitions of wit and humour, see Robert Bernard Martin, *The Triumph of Wit* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974). The social dimension of Wilde's comedy is considered in Roger B. Henkle's study, *Comedy and Culture*,

- England 1820–1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980) and – with a more complex model of cultural process – by Regenia Gagnier in her *Idylls of the Marketplace. Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1987).
- 8 In addition to the various letters from the period of composition included in Hart-Davis's editions (a selection is in Tydeman's *Casebook*), see also the first scenario of the play, reprinted in Peter Raby's edition, *The Importance of Being Earnest' and Other Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 308–10.
  - 9 Details of the revisions to this passage are given in my edition of the play (second edition, revised, London 1993) in the longer note to I, 91–109.
  - 10 On the homosexual interpretation of 'earnest', see Karl Beckson, *London in the 1890s. A Cultural History* (New York: Norton, 1992), ch. 8. The commoner usages of the word in the period are described in Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind* (New Haven, CT: Wellesley College, 1957), ch. 10, 'Earnestness'.
  - 11 In the manuscript draft of Act I, Algernon's debts are a far more pressing problem than in later versions. 'Wish to goodness some ass would leave me a large fortune. Can't go on as I am going on now. It is ridiculous' (Dickson, vol. 1, p. 4). This mercenary motive was displaced onto Lady Bracknell, whose view of Cecily's eligibility is affected by her fortune. (See, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, III, 160 etc.).
  - 12 W. H. Auden, 'An Improbable Life' (*New Yorker*, Mar. 1963), cited from Richard Ellmann (ed.), *Oscar Wilde, A Collection of Critical Essays* (Twentieth Century Views series; Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1969), p. 136. On the formal pattern, see Otto Reinert, 'The Courtship Dance in *The Importance of Being Earnest*', *Modern Drama* 1 (1958–9), 256–7.
  - 13 Wilde's use of this effect was noted by at least one reviewer: 'A remarkable feature of the piece is the entire absence of anything like a tableau at the end of an act, the curtain dropping in each case upon a comparatively unimportant remark' (*Daily News*, 15 Feb. 1895).
  - 14 Kerry Powell, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 110. Powell explores the relationship between Wilde's work and contemporary plays, both as direct and indirect sources, and as examples of the modes of writing with which he was engaged.
  - 15 Shaw's review (*Saturday Review*, 23 Feb. 1895) is reprinted in *Our Theatres in the Nineties by Bernard Shaw* (London, 3 vols., 1932), I, 41–8. See also 'My Memories of Oscar Wilde', written as an appendix to Frank Harris's *Oscar Wilde: His Life and Confessions* (2nd edn, 2 vols., New York: Frank Harris, 1918) and reprinted in Ellmann's collection and in Shaw's *Pen Portraits and Reviews* (London, 1932).
  - 16 H. Montgomery Hyde, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), p. 177.
  - 17 Alan Sinfield insists that the effeminacy of Jack and Algernon is part of a dandyism that at the time of writing (before Wilde's trial) did not suggest same-sex love (*The Wilde Century. Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Moment*, London: Cassell, 1994, pp. 69–70). For a determined enlisting of Wilde and his works in a gay canon, see Gary Schmidgall, *The Stranger Wilde. Interpreting Oscar* (London: Abacus, 1994). See also Joseph Bristow's introduction to his

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edition, *The Importance of Being Earnest and Related Writings* (London: Routledge, 1992).

- 18 The specifically Irish dimension of Bunburying, and the 'double life' in Wilde's writing, is proposed by Declan Kiberd, 'Wilde and the English Question', *Times Literary Supplement*, 16 Dec. 1994, pp. 13–15.

