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Source: *The Hudson Review*, Vol. 56, No. 3 (Autumn, 2003), pp. 475-484

Published by: The Hudson Review, Inc

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3852689>

Accessed: 06-02-2020 10:24 UTC

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ROGER SALE

Being Earnest

"If I thought Dora could ever love anybody else, or cease to love me, I don't know what I should do—go out of my mind, I think!"

"Ah Trot," said my aunt, shaking her head, and smiling gravely, "blind, blind, blind!"

"Someone I know, Trot," my aunt pursued, after a pause, "though of a very pliant disposition, has an earnestness of affection in him that reminds me of poor Baby. Earnestness is what that Somebody must look for, to sustain him and improve him, Trot. Deep downright, faithful earnestness."

—*David Copperfield*, Ch. XXXV

When Victoria became queen in 1837 London had only recently become a city of over a million people. When she died in 1901 it had just past six million, an explosion unimaginable before then and maybe not surpassed since. As London went over six million the next largest city in Britain had not yet reached a million, and in 1891 Sidney Webb estimated that "the three next largest cities in the world could almost be combined without out-numbering its millions."¹

New York, the city that would be first to overtake London in population, exploded by building up, aided by structural steel and the elevator. Second Empire Paris built apartments of four and five stories. London built single-family houses, attached, semi-attached, or detached, brick mostly, stuccoed brick for the more wealthy. Its boroughs expanded south into Surrey, north, west, and east almost to the borders of Middlesex with Berkshire, Hertfordshire, and Essex.

To accompany this vast expansion came the horse-drawn tram and, hard on its heels, the train, above and underground. Though there was a great swelling of working-class people in the East End, most of London's new people were middle class, and for the first time in history the majority of the people in a city

¹ Sidney Webb is quoted by Roy Porter in *London: A Social History* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 207.

were bourgeois. So they lived in houses, the men commuted to work and they worked in offices. As middle class people the world over have been doing ever since.

No one in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, to be sure, would dream of working, commuting to work, or working in an office. But Oscar Wilde perceived that something new, and for him threatening, had happened to marriage as the result of the population explosion of London and the accompanying changes in the way people lived and worked. The men left the house early and arrived home late, having been occupied in a place their wives had never been, and doing work of which their wives knew little or nothing. It was a badge of honor for the husbands that their wives not work, that they be responsible for the education of their sons until they went away to school, and of their daughters until they married. See what happens to the face of Wemmick in *Great Expectations* as he moves from the City to Wandsworth, and you can guess what Miss Skiffins' pleasures and responsibilities will be when she becomes Mrs. Wemmick. Betsy Trotwood deplored David's choice of Dora as his wife because she was not earnest, and in the idealized versions of this new kind of marriage arrangement the wives had holy tasks they were to undertake with earnestness indeed. But the husbands at least knew where their wives were, and what they did; it really was the wives who needed their husbands to be earnest, to be true and loyal because in many ways they were strangers.

Algernon Moncrieff is not earnest. He has a secret life. He has no money, and he is not responsible. He is a dedicated Bunburyist, as was Oscar Wilde. Behind almost every sentence he speaks in Act I is another sentence that he is standing on its head:

Lane's views on marriage seem somewhat lax. Really, if the lower orders don't set a good example, what on earth is the use of them? They seem, as a class, to have absolutely no sense of moral responsibility.

Someone, surely, must be earnest about marriage, but please, keep them in their place. Do not, for God's sake, bring them to the dinner table:

She will place me next Mary Farquhar, who always flirts with her own husband across the dinner table. It is not very pleasant. Indeed, it is

not even decent . . . and that sort of thing is enormously on the increase.

The problem with Mary Farquhar and the horde of wives like her is that her views are not at all lax; she is taking “cherish, honor, and obey” to mean just that. The word “flirt” does not belong in the same sentence with “husband”:

The amount of women who flirt with their own husbands is perfectly scandalous. It looks so bad. It is simply washing one’s clean linen in public.

Mary Farquhar is no Bunburyist, and Algernon’s days as one are soon to be over. Indeed, the Algernon of Act I doesn’t survive his first meeting with Cecily in Act II, and by Act III he’s been reduced to a cipher.

“Admiration for *The Importance of Being Earnest* is universal,” writes Camille Paglia, “but discussion of the play is scarce and slight.”² Quite so, and quite true also that Paglia, like most of the others, cannot imagine how the play is, on its own terms, about something, treated trivially, yes, but for serious people. The major difference between Paglia and others is that her lexical trampoline is larger because those jumping on it must include Lewis Carroll, Woody Allen, and, believe it, Edmund Spenser. Most of the others are more concerned with deflection via definition—does Wilde write satire or farce, does he look back to the Restoration or forward to the Absurd?

The moment Paglia is willing to say “Jack Worthing and Algernon Moncrieff, idle gentlemen about town, are androgynes of manners,” she and the play part company. For one thing, Jack cannot enjoy even the threat of an idle moment, and Algernon, in his own way, is busy all the time, playing the piano, eating cucumber sandwiches, accommodating his aunt as much as he can, and Bunburying whenever possible. More important, the greatest single mistake one can make with this play is to fail to see how little Algernon is like Jack. Just to hear their names should be enough, but most of what gets written about the play is solemn, and so tends to ignore the important surface matters of

² Camille Paglia’s “The English Epicene” is in *Sexual Personae* (London & New Haven, 1990), pp. 531–71.

name, appearance, and manner, and to point instead to the trivial moral matter of their both being deceivers.

Algernon delights in calling Jack a Bunburyist, but Jack loathes the idea. Jack flirts with Gwendolen ("disgraceful," Algernon calls it), and he is in town expressly to propose to her. Throughout their opening dialogue Algernon represents the older culture where girls don't marry the men they flirt with, where "in married life three is company, and two is none," while "divorces are made in heaven," so that "if I ever get married, I shall try to forget the fact." All of which scandalizes Jack, who sees nothing funny in his being trapped in the affair of the cigarette case, nor in the fact that his taking a high moral line with Cecily's education has forced him to invent his wayward brother; if Gwendolen accepts him he will of course walk the straight and narrow and kill Ernest Worthing first. He is *earnest* about being Ernest.

Again, Gwendolen is usually treated as representative of her class or as city mouse who contrasts with Cecily's country mouse. But in Act I the more telling contrast is Gwendolen with her mother. Of course Gwendolen will marry for love, while Lady Bracknell will choose her husband for her, using totally different criteria. Gwendolen is smart, she reads "the more expensive monthly magazines," she intends "to develop in many directions," while Lady Bracknell is suspicious of all this and thinks she has raised Gwendolen to be ignorant: "I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance."

Algernon, however, who is dominating this part of the action, says, "All women become like their mothers," and so we should note signs of this process in Gwendolen. She runs rings around Jack, she hates metaphysical speculation, she makes no move to bolt when she learns her mother's objections to Jack's having no parents, and she occupies center stage as much as she can and her mother allows.

Thus, Act I. Algernon's speeches are all jokes, and most have subtexts about dirty linen, where marriages are made, etc.

Jack has no jokes, nor does Lady Bracknell, he because he's earnest, she because everything is reason for outrage. Gwendolen is trickier because she pronounces as does her mother, but she seems unable to take her mother, or Jack, seriously, which makes her words seem in tone more like Algernon's.

The figure, though, who most resembles Algernon here is his servant Lane:

Algernon. Did you hear what I was playing, Lane?

Lane. I didn't think it polite to listen, sir.

In what seems to me the best essay on the play, Geoffrey Stone has a wonderful page on this opening dialogue. He uses Karl Popper's idea of metafiction to show how many ways one might read Lane's line above; I prefer "standing sentences on their head," to "metafiction," but concerning this play it comes to much the same thing.³ "I didn't think it polite to listen, sir" might ordinarily be used by a servant to refer to an overheard conversation involving something private, like Bunburying. Used to apply to listening to the piano, though, suggests Algernon's playing is bad, and it's that which Algy picks up on:

I'm sorry for that, for your sake. I don't play accurately—anyone can play accurately—but I play with wonderful expression.

There was a time, of course, when governesses taught young ladies to play tolerably, but in modern times—think of Herr Klesmer with Gwendolen Harleth in *Daniel Deronda*—accuracy has come to the fore, and Algernon is not about to have a piano teacher of that sort. Then we have the exchanges on servants drinking champagne and on marriage, and in each one Lane neatly overturns Algernon's apparent expectation. Algernon is only echoing Lane when he says later that if he ever marries he will try to forget the fact:

Lane. I have only been married once. That was in consequence of a misunderstanding between myself and a young person.

Algernon. (languidly) I don't know that I am much interested in your family life, Lane.

Lane. No, sir, it is not a very interesting subject. I never think of it myself.

Lane will not be trapped into any earnestness; his loftiness is high impenetrable, at least equal to his employer's.

Since we know *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a trivial play for serious people, our task as serious people is not to be content to say it's funny, but to be careful when describing the fun. Given that both Wilde and Ruskin had reason to feel threatened by the new conditions of marriage in bourgeois Victorian London (in the servant class, at least, little had changed!), it is important to

³ Geoffrey Stone's "Serious Bunburyism" is in *Essays in Criticism* 26 (1976), pp. 28–51.

remember that Ruskin, pronouncing solemnly, said of the new wives that “never until now were they so homeless as to say, like the poor Samaritan, ‘I have no husband.’”⁴ Wilde, on the other hand, only says “three is company, and two is none.” We might feel, imagining Wilde’s personal/private situation, that his words here have considerable poignancy. But to do right by the play we have to talk about the jokes, if at all possible, so they seem more rather than less funny. Our dirty linen, which we will never wash in public, is that though we know the play is wonderful, great fun to read and even better to perform, we find it hard to discuss its jokes without letting all the air out of its lighter than air machine. Camille Paglia, to her credit, gets far enough to note how many of Wilde’s speeches are not really conversational because they are meant to stand all by themselves, unanswerable, but she has no humor, and so can’t be serious about them.

For a number of years my wife and I have offered *Importance of Being Earnest* evenings as donations to benefit auctions. People are eager to put up anything from \$200 to \$500 so they and their friends can come read the play aloud, and one of the things each group has in common with the others is finding out they enjoyed it more than they thought they would. Is there another play we might offer up, instead, some Shakespeare or Chekhov, Shaw or Pinter that could draw like this?

Let us make something of the fact that there probably is not.

I have not counted the jokes in the play; however many, I reckon around a third are pretty much dead for our readers: Lady Bracknell on the French language and Revolution, much of Miss Prism and close to all of the Reverend Chasuble. Let’s say that another fifth are funny but so obviously dated as to seem more ludicrous than funny: Lady Bracknell’s quizzing Jack as a prospective son-in-law can account for a lot of these. But most of the rest, and most of that most concerns courtship and marriage, are as bright and shining as they were in 1895 because Wilde’s sense of middle-class marriage is one the well-educated professional people who delight in reading this play in our living room still share. They may not be aware of this, because they are insulated from it by Wilde’s pun on Earnest/Ernest and the accompanying fact that very few have used the word “earnest” in a list of necessary attributes for spouses for a very long time.

⁴ Ruskin’s lament for the new Londoners is in “The White Thorn Blossom,” *Fors Clavigera*, Vol. I, Letter 5.

If, though, Act I is Algernon's, Wilde has to run into problems in Act II. When Algernon is led through the paces of Cecily's diary, he can only follow along like a puppy, just as Jack does in his proposal scene with Gwendolen in Act I. Within the fiction of the play Algernon is straight, and he could then want to make love to Cecily at Jack's expense, but then to say he wants to marry Cecily he must set aside all he's said about marriage in Act I. He can no longer be Wilde's surrogate, and Wilde must find an alternative source of energy. He does this by turning the act over to Gwendolen and Cecily.

Algernon has already said these two will declare themselves friends and then quarrel, which they do, but more is involved than their simply fulfilling his prophecy:

Gwendolen. The home seems to me the proper sphere for the man. And certainly once a man begins to neglect his domestic duties he becomes painfully effeminate, does he not? And I don't like that. It makes men so very attractive.

The words collide here just as they do in speeches of Algernon's earlier, "home" running into "man," "neglecting . . . domestic" into "effeminate," and "effeminate" into "attractive." We may say that Gwendolen is just showing off because she assumes Cecily cannot follow such cleverness. We may also say that something germane to Wilde's private situation as a gay married male is at work here, and Wilde very much needs to have the city mouse rather than Algernon float these suggestions out.

Only to ignore them, to be sure; where could they go? What Gwendolen must get down to is the serious business of feminine envy and cattiness, because that will allow Wilde to do his miracles with Cecily:

Gwendolen. Do you mind my looking at you through my glasses?

Cecily. Oh, not at all Gwendolen. I'm very fond of being looked at.

Gwendolen. (After examining Cecily carefully through her lorgnette)
You are here on a short visit, I suppose.

Cecily. Oh, no! I live here.

Though Anthony Asquith's 1950 film of the play is much admired, it could not successfully survive the casting of Michael Redgrave, the star, as Jack, with Michael Denison playing second banana as Algernon; some of his best lines are cut and others are muffled. But though the first act is thereby embarrassing, this

scene in Act 2 is wonderful. It allows Joan Greenwood full space to do her city mouse number, and lets the relatively unknown Dorothy Tuten deliver lines that, one after another, are like Gwendolen's in Act 1, simultaneously naive enough in matters of feminine competition as to give herself away as to her vanity and her residence, and shimmering with the possibility that it is just these lines that will enable her to triumph in the competition. By comparison, Reese Witherspoon, in the more recent movie of the play, did not have a clue.

What does it tell us that if in the pre-1895 past, one finds so little of this kind of parry and thrust between women? There had been Molly Seagrim in the churchyard in *Tom Jones*, and, if one is willing to stretch it, there are Elizabeth Bennet and Caroline Bingley, Arabella and Sue Bridehead in *Jude*, but these are "battles" for a man. What Wilde wanted was a competition between women that didn't depend on their both loving a non-existent man, and more on their both being a kind of new woman, secure in herself, and inclined to be prickly when finding such a quality in another woman. Thus, by the time they are determining who received Ernest's proposal first, they are equals, trading lines like Beatrice and Benedict, or Mirabell and Millamant:

Cecily. This is no time for wearing the shallow mask of manners.
When I see a spade I call it a spade.

Gwendolen. I am glad to say that I have never seen a spade. It is obvious that our social spheres have been widely different.

From this point on they can spar, or embrace, but as independent equals.

Of course we need to remember that Gwendolen's "new woman" education is derived from "The Influence of an Independent Income on Thought," and Cecily's from not being exposed to such scandals as the fall of the rupee, but Wilde gives each tones that neither her parent/guardian nor her suitor can quite get hold of, or tame. Gwendolen longs for an earnest man, and gets one; Cecily wants a bad man and gets one.

By this point it seems to matter less than it might that Algernon can no longer be a hero of the heroic Age of Lying, though it does matter that much the weakest stretch in the play is the

Jack/Algernon conversation at the end of Act II, mostly concerning muffins. Then, in Act III, where Algernon is reduced to a cipher (he doesn't even have to have his name changed), Wilde hides it with brilliant farce involving handbags and army lists.

"You who are about to get married, I salute you thus," says Wilde, and the tone is struck so well, so trivially, that the heirs to Jack and Gwendolen have been sufficiently bedeviled by it that they may not ask what tone it is they are hearing or why they are indeed heirs to Jack and Gwendolen.

I have been so intent on making distinctions and comparisons among the four "lovers" that I've said little so far about Lady Bracknell, the character beloved even by those who have no interest in seeing how much Wilde uses her to hide his more subversive efforts elsewhere. It's perfectly clear that she is hard to register on such scales as smart/stupid, amusing/eerie, monster/irrelevant pussycat. What, then, to make of her:

Jack. (after some hesitation) I know nothing, Lady Bracknell.

Lady Bracknell. I am pleased to hear it. I do not approve of anything that interferes with natural ignorance. Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit, touch it and the bloom is gone.

This works like Algernon's sentences that turn unspoken sentences on their head, so much so that every phrase is a surprise. Earnest Jack could not trifle with the truth, so he hesitantly says he knows nothing, and gets a Bravo for his earnestness. The next sentence moves along until we get to "natural ignorance." This is said, presumably, to distinguish it from another kind of ignorance, but we have "innocence" in our heads, as the term Lady Bracknell must mean, and so don't pause to inquire. By some stroke of genius Lady Bracknell intuits that "natural ignorance" is an exotic fruit, by which she seems to mean that England's native soil is filled these days with various kinds of knowledge imparted by "the whole theory of modern education." Then:

Fortunately in England at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever. If it did, it would prove a serious danger to the upper classes, and probably lead to acts of violence in Grosvenor Square.

"Fortunately" runs into "no effect," then "acts of violence" into

“Grosvenor Square,” so that one must be as alert listening to Lady Bracknell as one must be with Algernon and often with Gwendolen and Cecily. Except that Lady Bracknell has no wit, and in the delicious garden of exotic fruit where she lives, sentences are so arranged as to turn out to be a delicious affront to those I’ve identified as the heirs to Gwendolen and Jack. Still, those heirs are free to be amused by the very splendor of her natural ignorance, while she is equally pleased to insist on it.

Such delicacy, such tact, is Wilde’s that he can, in his way, be as autumnal as Chekhov in *The Cherry Orchard* and as acerbic as Shaw in *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*. But theirs were the ways of comedy and satire as were easily open to them, while Wilde’s invention of a truly serious work of triviality has neither ancestors nor descendants. It may be the only work about which it could be said that its audience freely and genuinely laughs without quite being sure what it is laughing at.