From Faltering Arrow to Pistol Shot:
*The Importance of Being Earnest*

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Since 1966, the editors of the Collins *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, often used as a reference book, have chosen to print the reconstructed four-act text of *The Importance of Being Earnest* rather than the better-known version in three acts. The authoritative French Pléiades edition (1996) followed suit, arguing, like Collins, that since Wilde converted his original four-act play into a three-acter at the instigation of George Alexander, the four-act version is the play as Wilde intended it to be. Here I should like to oppose this view, and suggest the reasons for considering the three-act version superior.

When one reads the scanty comments on the difference between the four- and three-act texts of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, it often seems as though the only change Wilde made was the deletion of the so-called Gribsby scene, in which a solicitor of that name arrives at Jack’s country house to arrest ‘Mr Ernest Worthing’ for debt.¹ In a chapter of his book *Oscar Wilde: Art and Egotism*, Rodney Shewan explores the two texts a little further and finds that the four-act play contains more biographical and literary self-parody. Thus, the four-act text mentions debts at the Savoy, has Algernon nearly arrested and sent to Holloway prison and Cecily quote one of the *Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young*, and refers to theories from *The Decay of Lying*. Shewan suggests that the play’s ‘status as a classic owes much to the removal of precisely those references capable of direct

I have consulted the 1963 Collins edition, identical to Wilde’s 1899 edition, for the three-act play and the 1994 Collins edition for the four-act play. Many thanks to Professor Gert Buelens, Ghent University, for his kind advice and support.

biographical interpretation'.\(^2\) In this 1970 analysis, Shewan pays no attention to the impact the removal of these ‘references’ has on the internal logic and meaning of the text. In the meantime, scholars such as Russell Jackson and Sos Eltis have stressed that Wilde’s textual changes are not to be treated lightly. For Jackson, some of them ‘might seem trivial in themselves, but in a play so economical in its language and effects, they had a serious consequence’.\(^3\) Eltis has shown that through succeeding drafts the playwright subverted the Victorian melodrama tradition he used as a base. Neither scholar has, however, devoted specific attention to the meaningful changes between the four- and three-act texts. This article will argue that, whereas the four-act play looked like a society comedy with parodic, Gilbertian airs, the play in its final three-act form has been made more subtle and more radical at the same time. As I will show, the final rewriting of *The Importance of Being Earnest* effected a more poignant social subversion caused by a move towards absurdity, a fortification of the position of the play’s women, and a heightened identification with Victorian stereotypes.

When considering the revisions Wilde made to the original four-act text of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, it is good to take note of the fact that ‘revision’ in this case nearly always means ‘shortening’. Wilde very rarely added to the text while reworking; he changed meanings and implications mainly by taking out words, sentences and sequences from the original text. Taking out the Gribsby scene at George Alexander’s request, Wilde decided to conflate the second and third acts of his play into one, resulting in a second act distinctly longer than the other two. Proof of the fact that the three-act version of *The Importance of Being Earnest* is not simply to be dismissed as ‘Alexander’s version’ is that he also tackled the first and fourth acts, which the actor-manager had not complained about. Here, Wilde cut considerable portions of text that slowed down the play’s pace. Their deletion tightens the textual fabric and increases the swiftness of the play. However, most portions removed did create remarkable effects, and it is rewarding to take a look at what they are and what happens when they are removed.

As a rule, Wildean comedies touched upon fin-de-siècle social debates such as the issue of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ women (*Lady Windermere’s Fan*), the inequality of the sexes (*A Woman of No Importance*) and political corruption (*An Ideal Husband*). These are plays with an undercurrent of seriousness: they call into question the Victorian stereotyped definitions of men and women, good and bad, and expose the shallowness and hypocrisy of contemporary society. In order to

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achieve this, Wilde mobilises – and subverts – all the machinations and conventions of the melodrama tradition he works in, because melodrama endorses the Victorian system. There is an unease in the atmosphere, even though the plays apparently end happily. Convictions, judgements, are called into question, and wit and humour go hand in hand with serious reflection.

The Importance of Being Earnest is different. At the centre of the play are two pairs of lovers who, despite complications, fall into one another’s arms at the end. No moral conflict hovers over them, and the two references to social disgrace are erroneous and comical, as Jack’s ending up in a handbag was not an attempt at hiding a ‘social indiscretion’, and Miss Prism very soon turns out not to be his mother.

In fact, much of The Importance of Being Earnest’s lightness of tone was established during the last round of rewriting. The four-act text featured several instances of outside reality and its troubles intruding into the play’s light-hearted atmosphere. The most prominent serious item is the recurrent tension between different social classes.

So, for example, the four-act play contained the character of Moulton the gardener, a figure so small and insignificant to the plot that he could easily be dispensed with. However, in the second act the gardener served to illustrate the condescension in the attitude of the aristocracy towards their servants, as Cecily felt it necessary to point out to Moulton that ‘German is the language talked by people who live in Germany’. Moulton thus provided a critical counterbalance to the witty and easy relationship of Algernon and his manservant Lane.

In the same act, Cecily shocks Miss Prism and Canon Chasuble by airing views that smack of socialism, as when she retorts to Chasuble’s cheerful remark, ‘It is wonderful how girls are educated nowadays. I suppose you know all about relations between Capital and Labour?’ by observing: ‘All I know is about the relations between Capital and Idleness.’ Miss Prism’s anxious exclamation, ‘Cecily, that sounds like Socialism! And I suppose you know where Socialism leads to?’ is parried by Cecily’s ‘Oh, yes! That leads to Rational Dress, Miss Prism.’

Although Cecily’s remarks seem innocent rather than calculated to shock, she nevertheless touches upon several issues that disturbed Victorian society at the end of the nineteenth century, namely the rise of socialism and the birth of feminism. Socialism in the public eye was often linked with feminism and New Womanhood. Although the connection between the two movements was less close than the public assumed, New Women were indeed inspired by socialist theories.4 The Rational Dress movement went

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against the grain of contemporary women’s fashion by attacking tight
lacing and became associated with women’s liberation, and feminists were
stereotypically portrayed as ‘badly dressed’, that is, as refusing to wear
fashionable (male-dictated) clothes.5

This small dialogue in the four-act version of the play seems light-
hearted and funny enough, but actually contains a rather acerbic sketch of
upper-class short-sightedness. Cecily, as an exponent of her class, is not
aware of the changes taking place in society, and her greatest concern is
that Rational Dress, notoriously unbecoming and middle-class, may be
gaining support.

Class tensions and the aristocratic fear of a proletarian revolution are
also more keenly apparent in Lady Bracknell’s earlier interview with Jack
than in the three-act text, when the latter insists that he doesn’t want ‘to put
the asses against the classes’.

Taking out such blatant – even if critical – references to tensions between
the classes, Wilde also removes the atmosphere of unease and the threat
that they entail. Lady Bracknell’s references remain, but views like ‘to be
born, or at any rate bred, in a hand-bag, whether it has 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’, are state-
ments so out of proportion that they undermine the drama they invoke and
reduce it to absurdity. Lady Bracknell’s awareness of lower-class attacks on
the upper class is exaggerated to such a point that she seems at times comically
paranoid. Reducing the four acts to three, Wilde resolutely chooses farce as
a means of expression and creates a world separated from actual life by
a magic veil of humorous detachment.

Related to this is the removal of another striking feature in the older text,
namely the fact that the characters repeatedly seek to explain absurdities
with which they are confronted. An example is the passage in the second
act where Jack asks Canon Chasuble to christen him, asserting his doubts
on his christening at birth, since ‘There are circumstances, unnecessary to
mention at present, connected with my birth and early life that make me
think I was a good deal neglected. I certainly wasn’t properly looked after,
at any rate.’ In the three-act version the response to the Canon’s query
whether he has ‘any grave doubts on the subject’ becomes the laconic
‘I certainly intend to have.’ The effect is entirely different. If the earlier
version is conventional, submitting to the rules of ordinary life, the final
version’s quizzical answer renders the cleric’s seriousness oddly out of tune.

5 Ibid., pp. 121–2. Oscar Wilde sympathised with the Rational Dress movement
and wrote several articles supporting it. His wife Constance edited the society’s
magazine for several years.
Another example from the same act is the attempt to square Jack’s announcement of the death of his brother Ernest in Paris, related to him in a telegram from the manager of the Grand Hotel, with the fact that Cecily comes in a few minutes later to say that Ernest is waiting in the dining room. Canon Chasuble surmises: ‘That telegram from Paris seems to have been a somewhat heartless jest by someone who wished to play upon your feelings.’ In the three-act text Chasuble’s reference to the telegram is deleted, and everybody seems naively uncritical or happily oblivious of the leaks and holes in Jack’s manipulation of the truth.

Wilde’s systematic removal of any explanatory elements heightens the atmosphere of absurdity already invoked by the plot’s double lives and mistaken identities. It leads to a certain wonderful anarchy in the final version of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, situating the play in a world sufficiently like Victorian England to be identifiable with it, but sufficiently unlike it not to coincide with it. Reason is ruled out, and the norms and decrees of Victorian society which so dominated Wilde’s earlier comedies are now, if not exactly absent, at least not threatening because they work in what Robert Jordan aptly calls ‘a world without evil’, where ‘sin and degradation...do not exist, except as unemotional abstractions’.6

Yet the absurdity does not render the play simply harmless. When Wilde reworks the four-act play into three acts, he chooses more radically to refuse the Victorian norms which he had originally supported clearly enough through what seem at first sight negligible details, such as four little words in a speech:

> When one is placed in the position of guardian, one has to adopt a very high moral tone on all subjects. It’s one’s duty to do so. And as a high moral tone can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one’s health or one’s happiness if carried to excess, in order to get up to town I have always pretended to have a younger brother of the name of Ernest, who lives in the Albany, and gets into the most dreadful scrapes. (italics added)

The words ‘if carried to excess’ make Jack’s argument conventional: excess, even of morality, is bad. But take out this qualification, as Wilde did in 1895, and suddenly Jack states as a matter of fact that a moral tone is bad for health and happiness. This is exemplary of Wilde’s meticulous consideration of every word in the text, and symbolic of the radicalisation of the

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play during the final revision. The characters’ innocence despite their lack of moral sense becomes Wilde’s key point.

Although these interventions moved the play further away from melodrama, Wilde at the same time reinforced the identification of his characters with the stereotypes of melodrama. Cecily and Jack, in particular, undergo a distinct change of characterisation. Cecily is based on the stereotype of the Good Woman, an angelic creature and the supreme picture of Victorian femininity. A Good Woman was dependent, gentle, self-sacrificing and forgiving, and her mission was to be a guide for men who were likely to leave the path of Victorian respectability. In an early sketch found in an 1894 letter to Alexander, Wilde points out that Cecily only consents to marry her guardian’s presumed wicked brother ‘because she thought he was bad and wanted guidance’. When she finds out that her fiancé is not the profligate he pretended to be, she breaks off the engagement.7

However, in the four-act play Cecily explicitly resists qualification as a Good Woman. When Algernon presents himself to her as Ernest in the second act and asks her to make his reform her mission, she vociferously rejects his assumption that ‘every woman ha[s] a mission of some kind’, retorting that ‘Every female has! No woman. Besides, I have no time to reform you this afternoon.’ If Cecily seems insulted, it is probably because the concept of the woman with a mission is rather middle-class and the four-act Cecily, as we have seen earlier, is very class-conscious. The three-act Cecily reacts very differently, stating simply, ‘I’m afraid I’ve no time, this afternoon.’ There is nothing to suggest that she will not gladly take the task upon her later, and her tone, quite contrary to that of the earlier Cecily, is good-humoured and playful. Wilde now highlights the naivety and fun in the apparent assumption that reforming a person should take no more than one afternoon, a joke overruled in the earlier text by the harshness of Cecily’s tone.

The four-act Cecily is on the whole less innocent than she appears at first sight. In a drawing-room scene between Cecily and Miss Prism at the beginning of the third act, later deleted, Cecily vents some opinions that are entirely uncharacteristic of a Good Woman, or of any young lady a good Victorian would have termed ‘decent’. She tells her governess that ‘it is only the superficial qualities that last. Man’s deeper nature is soon found out’, an epigram from Wilde’s Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young. These epigrams, published in the Oxford undergraduate magazine The Chameleon in 1894, were cited during the 1895 trials as indicative of Wilde’s corrupting influence on the young. But Cecily goes even further by

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deriding so-called improving books: ‘Are there ever any ideas in improving books?’ she asks. ‘I fear not. I get my ideas... in the garden.’

However, while Cecily has no qualms about expressing highly suspicious views, she tries to keep up an appearance of obedience and innocence, especially when in the company of Jack or Algernon. Thus, when the latter, who wants to see Cecily without the hindrance of Miss Prism’s presence, asks her to help him concoct an excuse to make the governess leave, it is Cecily who suggests a ruse: Algernon is to tell Miss Prism that Dr Chasuble is waiting for her. Yet, though the lie is hers, Cecily explicitly denies being deceptive and wants Algernon to interpret her action as an experiment in cause and effect.

Another important manifestation of the split between the four-act Cecily’s actual behaviour, and her awareness of what is socially expected of her, occurs in the third act, where she discloses to Algernon that in the imaginary world of her diary they have been engaged for several months, and that he has been regularly writing to her. When he objects that he never wrote her any letters, she says:

You need hardly remind me of that, Ernest. I remember it only too well. I grew tired of asking the postman every morning if he had a London letter for me. My health began to give way under the strain and anxiety. So I wrote your letters for you, and had them posted to me in the village by my maid. I wrote always three times a week and sometimes oftener.

Cecily here comes up with a Victorian cliché which supposed women to be weaker and less healthy than men. She uses the cliché eagerly to make Algernon feel guilty, not knowing that in the first act he has already been informed by Jack that she is in the best of health, has a capital appetite, and goes for long walks.

In the revised three-act version, Cecily is presented in an entirely different way thanks to a tightened reply with a completely different implication: ‘You need hardly remind me of that, Ernest. I remember only too well that I was forced to write your letters for you. I wrote always three times a week, and sometimes oftener.’ Here, Cecily is impressively strong and determined: she immediately decides to take matters into her own hands. She does not invoke weakness to appeal to Algernon’s manly feelings of protectiveness, but rather wins him by her pertinence and determination. The wail and cry for attention of the earlier text is turned into a dignified reproach.

The character of Cecily in the four-act text is an uneasy mix between a Good Woman and a more experienced, knowing woman; by the final version, she has developed into an innocent young girl who is nevertheless clever, self-confident and strong. The four-act Cecily seems quite dim, repeatedly misreading metaphors and expressions. When in the second act Miss Prism says ‘As a man sows, so let him reap’, Cecily remarks that men don’t sew. In the next act Algernon complains that he is forced to ‘go back again into the cold world’, Cecily responding that ‘the day, even for the month of July, is unusually warm’. These remarks are removed in the three-act play so that Cecily’s innocence cannot be mistaken for stupidity.

Cecily’s increased self-confidence in the three-act text is exemplified in an exchange with Merriman, the butler, who announces the arrival of ‘Ernest Worthing’:

**CECILY (to herself).** I don’t think Miss Prism would like my being alone with [Ernest]. So I had better send for him at once, before she comes in. *(To MERRIMAN)* Ask Mr. Ernest Worthing to come here. I suppose you had better talk to the housekeeper about a room for him.

**MERRIMAN.** I have already sent his luggage up to the Blue Room, Miss: next to Mr. Worthing’s own room.

**CECILY.** Oh! That is all right.

The corresponding passage in the three-act play reads:

**CECILY.** Ask Mr Ernest to come here. I suppose you had better talk to the housekeeper about a room for him.

**MERRIMAN.** Yes, Miss.

Whereas in the first version Cecily’s decision to take up the role of hostess seems more informed by schoolgirlish naughtiness and a wayward challenging of her teacher’s wishes, the final version shows her naturally assuming the role of lady of the house. Her authority is reinforced by the fact that the manservant simply obeys her orders whereas in the earlier text he had anticipated them.

A final aspect of Cecily’s growth to independence in the evolution from four to three acts is her behaviour in her courtship with Algernon. If, in the

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9 As Sos Eltis, *Revising Wilde*, p. 183, points out, Wilde was not the only playwright to create a character of this kind. W. S. Gilbert’s Azema in *The Palace of Truth* from 1870 is devious and experienced, but poses as innocent and modest in order to ensnare the man of her choice.
four-act play, she blatantly angles for his attention, in the three-act play her interest in him is first revealed to her baffled suitor by the laconic reply to his proposal: 'You silly boy! Of course [I will marry you]. Why, we have been engaged for the last three months.' Cecily has been quietly, modestly in control the whole time and accepts the proposal as her due.

By contrast, in the four-act version, Algernon is still allowed to talk disparagingly of women’s cleverness, speculating to Jack that Cecily must be ‘one of those dull, intellectual girls one meets all over the place. Girls who have got large minds and large feet.’ The association of intellectuality in women with ugliness was of course an anti-feminist stock-in-trade to deride New Women and their plea for equality of education.10 One is tempted to say that Algernon, who entertains such conservative opinions on women and learning, deserves no better than the Cecily of the four-act play, who, if ‘excessively pretty’, as Jack states, is also accordingly silly. Removing the reactionary comment, Wilde turns his dandy into a more suitable partner for the final version of Cecily Cardew.

Control of space, too, marks a significant shift between the four- and three-act versions, the very conflation of the second and third acts creating the transmutation. The original second act was situated in the garden of Jack’s manor, the third in the drawing-room. After the exposure of Jack and Algernon in the third act, Gwendolen and Cecily leave the drawing-room and go into the garden. They challenge the men to come after them by stating that they are too cowardly to do so. However, at the beginning of the fourth act the men have not responded to their bait and the women surrender by re-entering the house. In the three-act play, the garden setting is preserved and Gwendolen and Cecily retire into the house. This time it is the men who make an attempt at conciliation by coming after them, whereas the women are first to speak. Thus Wilde establishes an equality between the sexes that was not there in the four-act play.

Also greatly changed in the course of the final rewriting, but to different effect, is the character of Jack. If, in the earliest sketch of the play, Jack was based on the Melodrama Gentleman, the personification of Victorian ideal manliness, an honest, industrious, serious and protective male,11 in the four-act text he is hardly recognisable as such. Instead, Jack is fully engaged in the game of the double life, confessing, for instance, to Algernon that he

10 As a reaction, New Woman writers took great care to depict their heroines as both clever and attractive, turning the war of the sexes, in Ann Heilmann’s words, into a ‘sexy war’: New Woman Fiction, p. 32.

11 In the early sketch, an incarnation of Gwendolen discovers that he is, besides being a JP, ‘a county-councillor: a churchwarden: a philanthropist: a good example’ (Wilde, Letters, p. 596).
cannot dine at the Savoy restaurant because he owes the place a considerable amount of money, explaining, 'I must keep up Ernest’s reputation. Ernest is one of those chaps who never pays a bill. He gets writted about once a week.' By the final version of the play Jack once more approximates to the original Melodrama Gentleman, inventing Ernest merely as a means to enable him to escape his responsibilities occasionally and come up to town, while nothing points in the direction of his ever doing anything unconventional there.

Likewise, in the earlier text Jack participates in Algernon’s game to such a degree that he acknowledges the existence of Mr Bunbury. When he wants to persuade Algernon to go back to London at the end of the second act, Jack puts forward such arguments as ‘Bunbury is extremely ill, and your place is by his side.’ In the corresponding passage of the final play, Jack can think of nothing better than to appeal to Algernon’s more abstract sense of gentlemanly behaviour (‘Your duty as a gentleman calls you back’), but this produces no effect whatsoever on the dandy.

Finally, in the earlier version Jack is much closer to Algernon in the ease with which he lies. When questioned on the subject of Cecily, the earlier Jack, like his later incarnation, denies knowing anybody of that name but, unlike the later Jack, cautiously and shrewdly adds ‘as far as I remember’, thus enabling himself to invoke a defective memory if necessary. Moreover, he is given a short speech in defence of the lie as an act of genius: ‘To invent anything at all is an act of sheer genius, and, in a commercial age like ours, shows considerable physical courage.’ The argument is clearly reminiscent of the views expounded by Vivian in Wilde’s essay The Decay of Lying, and is distinctly unconventional. Wilde’s estimation of the lie as an art to be encouraged runs counter to Victorian (and Christian) rules of decent behaviour. In making Jack repeat his own views, Wilde marks him as a dandy and a rebel against society’s laws.

Reworking the text in 1895, Wilde took care to remove every one of Jack’s more obviously dandiacal traits. There are no more excesses at the Savoy, no more foie gras and champagne ‘diet’, and no more quick partaking in the logic of Bunburying. Wilde now invites the audience to identify Jack with the stock melodrama character of the Gentleman, only to disturb its stereotyped apprehensions: Jack is in fact conservative to the core, but as such has to have recourse to a double life from time to time. In the final version, conservative Victorian gentlemen prove unable to live up constantly to the seriousness and truthfulness expected of them.

Truthfulness, or indeed earnestness, is Wilde’s main target in the play, and he ultimately calls upon the gentleman to establish the truth of masks. In both versions, Jack thinks he has been lying when calling himself Ernest and pretending to have a brother, only to discover that his name is indeed
Ernest and that he has a brother, Algernon. After his earlier endorsement of the lie, it comes as no surprise that Jack in the four-act text should state that it is terrible to find out that he has been speaking the truth. But in the three-act text Jack’s statement becomes much more disturbing: in the absence of a speech in defence of lies, it is a conventional gentleman who proclaims his unease with truth, lending the play’s title extra poignancy. Wilde establishes here what he has proclaimed elsewhere, namely that masterful lies are a superior truth. He undermines the very concept of ‘earnestness’ by which Victorian society set such high store, and his move is all the more powerful when worked by Jack the Gentleman rather than by Jack the Dandy. The rigid Victorian world, Wilde suggests, must eventually be destroyed by its own agents.

A friend once suggested to Wilde that farce should be like a piece of mosaic. He disagreed: it must go like a pistol shot. Revising his play at George Alexander’s request, Wilde tightened it to the speed of a bullet, though retaining, as Katherine Worth remarks, slowness and stateliness in the dialogue. The Importance of Being Earnest, cautiously wrapped up in sublime humour and absurdity as it is in its final version, is the most radically subversive of Wilde’s plays. If George Alexander had been reluctant to express his dissatisfaction with the play, Wilde would very probably not have rewritten it, and would have let it remain a faltering arrow.

12 Ellmann, Wilde, p. 423.