lives, one respectable, one frivolous, neither earnest. Bunburyism, as Algernon confesses in the opening of the play, is the application of science to life, to the exclusion of sentiment. Sentiment properly belongs to art. The science is the science of having a good time. These are obviously false distinctions, and all that can be said for Bunburyism as a way of life is that it offers relief from a social round where, in Lady Bracknell’s words, good behavior and well being “rarely go together,” and where, according to Jack, “a high moral tone can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one’s health or one’s happiness.” Bunburyism marks one of the extreme points in the swing of the pendulum, Victorianism the other.

Neither of the two Bunburyists is either earnest or Ernest—before the very end.1 It is only then that they become, and in more than a single sense, themselves. When the action begins they have already escaped the mortifying seriousness of convention, but it takes them three acts and the movement from town to country—the movement has symbolic relevance as a return to “naturalness”—to regain their balance and become earnest, that is, neither conventionally nor frivolously hypocritical. At the end of the play the respectable (though amorous) Miss Prism (her name suggests “prim prison”) has been unmasked, the four young people are romantically engaged, Jack has discovered his Bunburying identity to be his true self, and Lady Bracknell must recognize the contemptible orphan of Act I, “born, or at any rate, bred in a handbag,” as her own sister’s son. The plot, as it were, makes a fool of respectability and proves the two Bunburyists “right” in their escapade. But it also repudiates Bunburyism. Algernon, who as a Bunburyist spoke cynically about proposals and matrimony in Act I, is happily proposing marriage to Cecily in Act II, and at the end his initial false dichotomies between life and art, science and sentiment, have been resolved in romance. The radical remedy of Bunburying has effected a cure, the pendulum rests in the perpendicular, and we share Jack’s final conviction of “the vital Importance of Being Earnest.” The two adjectives have not been chosen lightly.

Wilde as Parodist: A Second Look at The Importance of Being Earnest

Richard Foster

The Importance of Being Earnest is apt to be a stumbling block both to the detractors and admirers of Oscar Wilde as a man of letters. Those who want to dismiss him as the greatest ass of aestheticism may be troubled to find themselves, in this play, laughing with rather than at Wilde. Those few, on the other hand, who see in the whole of Wilde’s work the same revolutionary quest for new means and materials of literary expression which characterized the poetic innovators of nineteenth-century France sometimes find it hard to laugh at all. Meanwhile, the play
continues to flourish as one of the world's most robust stage classics. Part of the critics' difficulty—an inadequacy frequently experienced by critics, never by audiences—is that they cannot accurately name its type. The terms "farce" and "comedy of manners," the labels most frequently applied to Earnest, are neither of them adequate designations of the especially subtle and complicated artistic "being" that the play has.

Farce, first of all, depends for its effects upon extremely simplified characters tangling themselves up in incongruous situations, and upon a knowing audience gleeefully anticipating their falling victim, in their ignorance, to some enormous but harmless confusion of fact or identity. We think of The Comedy of Errors, or She Stoops to Conquer, of Uncle Toby about to show "the very place" to the breathless Widow Wadman. Wilde's characters are certainly uncomplicated, and he makes use of some farce situations, such as Jack's mourning scene and his recognition scene at the end of the play. But the comedy of Earnest subsists, for the most part, not in action or situation but in dialogue. The dialogue, furthermore, is everywhere an exercise of wit—a subtler comic effect than farce can comfortably take very much time for. This is only a tentative claim, to be expanded on later, that the play is a very intellectual kind of comedy, too intellectual, certainly, to be described simply as a farce.

The Importance of Being Earnest is more often, and perhaps somewhat more accurately, regarded as a comedy of manners. Ridicule and exposure of the vanities, the hypocrisies, and the idleness of the upper classes is, to be sure, the main function of its verbal wit. Moreover, the stock patterns of Restoration and eighteenth-century manners comedy are evident in various characters: Jack and Algernon, though in quest of love rather than riches or intrigue, are unmistakably brothers to the opportunistic young wits that hunted in pairs through the social jungles of earlier comedy; Cecily and Gwendolen are their quarry; Lady Bracknell's is the dowager role, though she is more dominant and more shrewdly financial than her shrill, physical Restoration forebears; but perhaps Miss Prism's middle-aged sexuality, only just contained by the strictures of Victorian propriety, makes her, after all, a more direct descendant of Lady Wishfort.

But Earnest, in spite of these qualities, is not a true comedy of manners either. It is not even nearly one. A comedy of manners is fundamentally realistic; it requires the audience to accept the world presented on the stage as a real world, a possible world; and its human foibles, even if heightened and exaggerated in the play's satirical exposure of them, are nevertheless laughed at as representations of real excesses. A clear sign of the realism of manners comedy is the fact that there are characters in it that can always recognize a fool. The laughter that the witty young bucks of the older comedy share with the audience at the expense of a fool or fop unites the "real" world and the world of the play by showing that the same criteria for reason and unreason are valid in both. But Jack and Algernon are strangely respectful of Prism and Chasuble—two clear fools—because fools must be taken seriously in the extra-rational world of Wilde's play. When we recognize this extra-rational quality of Wilde's play, we begin to see that its satirical effects are less close to The Way of the World and The Rivals than to "The Rape of the Lock" and Patience. Where Congreve and Sheridan created a pretty close, if heightened, imitation of that world, Wilde and Gilbert and Pope performed an alchemic reductio ad absurdum of it. Folly is represented in the comedy of manners, essentialized in Pope's mock epic, Gilbert's operettas, and Wilde's play.

Wilde accomplishes this essentialization of folly by creating an "as if" world in which "real" values are inverted, reason and unreason interchanged, and the prob-
able defined by improbability. The structure and materials of this "as if" world become especially interesting when we remember that the English theater was, at this time, just beginning to get over a century-long siege of melodrama and sentimentalism. Gwendolen's observation, for example, that "in matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing" has the effect of ridiculing the "poetic" manner of contemporary melodrama, which Robertson and Jones had already rebelled against. Early in Act I, just after Jack has confessed "the whole truth pure and simple" about Cecily and his fictional brother Ernest, Algernon delivers an even more direct and sweeping critical dictum: "The truth," says Algy, "is rarely pure and never simple. Modern life would be very tedious if it were either, and modern literature a complete impossibility." From this point on, Wilde's play is to be a satiric demonstration of how art can lie romantically about human beings and distort the simple laws of real life with melodramatic complications and improbably easy escapes from them. Wilde has accomplished this by purloining from the hallowed edifice of romantic literature certain standard characters, themes, and plot situations in order to build out of them a comedy that fuses contemporary social satire with a straight-faced taking-off of the usages of the popular fiction and drama of Wilde's time, and, inevitably, of other times as well.

II

Wilde's first technique is to spoof the timeless romantic fictions of love's inception. The myth of love at first sight undergoes a kind of superparody in the scene where Cecily does Algernon's punctual love-making one better by recounting from her "diary" the story of their engagement, his love letters (which she has written), the breaking of their engagement according to the demands of romantic love ritual, and their re-engagement. Cecily's notation of the broken engagement, in its casually incongruous juxtaposition of values, is reminiscent of Pope's satiric method in "The Rape of the Lock," where the deaths of lap-dogs and of husbands are of equal consequence: "Today I broke off my engagement with Ernest. I feel it is better to do so. The weather still continues charming." Gwendolen's love for Jack is sympathy itself; it is the old romantic idea of spiritual love based on simplicity and Platonic sensibility: "The story of your romantic origin, as related to me by mamma, with unpleasing comments, has naturally stirred the deeper fibers of my nature. Your Christian name has an irresistible fascination. The simplicity of your character makes you exquisitely incomprehensible to me." In a more sacred context, Desdemona, who saw her lover's visage "in his mind" just as Gwendolen sees Jack's in his name, fell in love with Othello for somewhat similar reasons. "My story being done," says Othello, "she gave me for my pains a world of sighs. She swore, in faith, 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange,/'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful." Othello sums up the nature of her love, and of Gwendolen's, when he says, "She loved me for the dangers I had passed...."

Wilde reinforces his parody of the beautiful innocence of love at first sight and the spiritual impregnability of Platonic love by short-circuiting what our expectations would be if this were either the usual romantic melodrama or a real comedy of manners. Lady Bracknell's cupidity has arisen suddenly as an impediment to both marriages. But while the two young men—who ought to bounce away with a witticism or else do something dashing—are prostrate with devotion, the two young ladies are already making other plans. Gwendolen, the exponent of ideals and ideal love culled from "the more expensive monthly magazines," promises Jack, with superbly hardheaded double vision, that "although [Lady Bracknell] may prevent us from becoming man and wife, and I may marry someone else, and
marry often, nothing can alter my eternal devotion to you." And though Algernon, the true voice of cynicism, is preposterously ready to wait seventeen years until his beloved legally comes of age at thirty-five, Cecily, the unspoiled country lass, belies her simple kind by declining his devotion: "I couldn't wait all that time. I hate waiting even five minutes for anybody. It makes me rather cross."

A standard complication of the literature of love that is parodied here is the love breach or "misunderstanding"—the lie, the secret sin out of the past, the error in judgment, the buried flaw of character that rises unbidden to the surface—which threatens to destroy love's ideality. But as the cases of Red Crosse and Una, Tom Jones and Sophia, Elizabeth and Darcy, and dozens of others have demonstrated, the breach can usually be healed if the offending party undergoes some penance or performs some act of selfless generosity or courage, whether psychological or material, in order to prove himself. In Earnest the love breach occurs when Gwendolen and Cecily discover that their Ernest's are impostors named, respectively, Jack and Algernon; and the restoration of love is made possible when Jack and Algernon declare themselves ready to face the horrors of a christening. The situation at this point is so patently ludicrous, and the sentiments expressed by the two girls are at once so absurdly didactic and so sounding with the bathos of melodramatic reconciliation that we can hardly miss, amid the satire of manners, Wilde's strong undercurrent of literary satire.

But perhaps the most impressive evidence that Wilde's play is, in part at least, an elaborate literary lampoon, lies in the circumstances of the two pairs of lovers. The relationship of Algernon to Cecily, first of all, is essentially that of Rochester to Jane Eyre, of Mr. B. to Pamela. It is the situation of the jaded, world-weary, cynical, and preferably dissolute male being reformed, regenerated, and resentimentalized by the fresh, innocent, and feeling girl reared in isolation from the "world," preferably in the country. Algernon's cynicism is obvious enough in his nastily witty observations on life, and in his boredom with all amusements. The sign of his dissoluteness, one of Wilde's most brilliant comic strokes, is his constant hunger, his entire inability to resist stuffing himself at every opportunity. By this means Wilde has reduced the rōe figure to a man of straw—or muffins. And he thrusts him through in the bit of dialogue where Algernon-as-Ernest learns from Cecily that Jack is going to banish him, and that he will have to choose between Australia and "the next world." Cecily questions whether he is good enough even for "this world," and Algy admits that he isn't: "... I want you to reform me. You might make that your mission, if you don't mind." "I'm afraid I haven't time, this afternoon," Cecily responds unfeelingly. In a line or two it turns out, predictably, that Algernon is hungry. "How thoughtless of me," says Cecily. "I should have remembered that when one is going to lead an entirely new life, one requires regular and wholesome meals."

The point of Wilde's satire is found in the nature of Algernon's reformation. Before his first interview with Cecily is over, Algernon is engaged to be married and reconciled to getting christened. But he had already been exploded in his very first exchange with Cecily, when his supposedly irretrievable sophistication is bested by the supposedly artless and sheltered country girl's supersophistication: "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." With this the wit has passed from Algernon to Cecily, and he never regains it at any time when she is on the scene. The moral of Wilde's parody: the rāke is a fake, girlish innocence is the bait of a monstrous mantrap, the wages of sin is matrimony.

Jack's troubled pursuit of Gwendolen embodies still another stock situation of
romantic love fiction. As classic as *The Winter's Tale*, as old-fashioned as *Caste*, and as modern as last night's television play or last week's movie, it is the problem situation of two lovers separated by a barrier of class difference. Sometimes it is a matter of money, sometimes of blood. But in the majority of cases true love is saved by some last minute miracle, usually a surprising revelation of someone's real identity. The most impressive exercise of this kind is probably in *The Conscious Lovers*, where Steele relieves the long-suffering young Bevil by allowing his indigent sweetheart to prove to be the long lost daughter of Mr. Sealand, the fabulously wealthy parent of the girl Bevil had been unhappily scheduled to couple with in a purely business marriage. The enormity of Steele's resolution is only a little less notable than Wilde's parody of the type. After herding all his characters down to Shropshire to witness the marvels of his *deus ex machina*, Wilde parades before their eyes an extraordinary succession of coincidental revelations culminating in Jack's discovery not only that he is Algernon's brother but that his name really is Ernest.

Wilde delicately frames his recognition scene as a theatrical take-off by making Lady Bracknell say, with lofty aesthetic dread, "In families of high position strange coincidences are not supposed to occur. It is hardly considered the thing." Gwendolen, however, is having a splendid time; "The suspense is terrible. I hope it will last."

III

In Edouard Roditi's book *Oscar Wilde* (1947) we read this astonishing statement about *The Importance of Being Earnest* and its stupendous finale:

... its plot is at times too heavily contrived, especially in the last act: the sudden revelation of Miss Prism's past solves too conveniently the problems of the hero's origin, and too many of the embarrassing lies of the play are too neatly resolved into truth. Such reliance on the whimsies of chance weakens the satire of a comedy of manners; its plot should seem to grow more directly out of the follies of its characters, mirroring the irrationality of an absurd society of human beings responsible for their own predicaments rather than the irresponsible tricks of a contemptibly frivolous destiny. (p. 138)

Mr. Roditi, a critic who takes Wilde very seriously, has mistaken his most celebrated work for an inchoate comedy of manners and has therefore drawn the unfortunately academic conclusion that it is formally imperfect and artistically trivial. The play's "flaws"—the contrivances of plot, the convenience of its coincidences, and the neatness of its resolution—are, of course, its whole point. The subtlety of Wilde's art is such that it is easy to mistake *Earnest* for something it isn't, or else to dismiss it as a charming but inconsequential frill. But if intelligent laughter is better than mere laughter, it is worth understanding what kind of comedy Wilde has achieved by wedding social satire with literary burlesque.

Nothing in the play, first of all, is quite what it seems. The characters seem to wear badges of their natures; yet their sentiments and actions continually revoke and deny them. Jack and Algernon, tagged as clever young worldlings, are really sentimentalists and fussbudgets at heart. Algernon, it has already been pointed out, is quite fully exposed early in Act II. And Jack, though he waves once or twice the flag of cynical wit or clever pretense, worries and perspires through most of the play, muttering pettishly against Algernon's "nonsense" and appetite. He is a fuddled incompetent from the moment, early in Act I, when Algernon first challenges him on the matter of Cecily; and Gwendolen's wooing, only a little later, very nearly shatters him.

This same phenomenon in reverse is true of the two girls. Both of them bear the marks of the romantic Female. Both are pleased, first of all, to represent themselves as "better" than their world: Cecily because she has been preserved, unspoiled,
in countrified isolation, and Gwendolen because she is, in Jack's phrase, "a sensible intellectual girl" whose nature has been enriched by heavy reading and brave thinking. But both also deport themselves as proper young ladies who appear to submit to the wishes of their parents and guardians when the plot requires them to; this is because the true romantic Female is never a stickler for rebellion. Yet these rarefied and genteel girls are the worldliest of schemers. They manipulate their lovers like men on a chess board, and one cannot escape the feeling, furthermore, that even Lady Bracknell prevails ultimately because they permit her to.

The dramatic effect of the comedy, then, is not of foolish but real people flaunting the real world's laws of reason, but of archetypal roles being gravely travestied. The characters know they are in a play, and they know what kind of play it is. Cecily and Gwendolen "do" parodies of themselves as they assist their lovers in their own self-ridiculing transformation from cynical wits to true men of feeling. The same is true of Prism and Chasuble, even of Lane, who knows perfectly well that he is the type of the wry butler-confidant who is smarter than his employer. Lady Bracknell is the only exception: her mind's eye, steadily on the funds, sees other matters—love, literature, virtue— exactly for what they are. She is a kind of choric ballast that weights the satire's indirection with direct scorn.

Wilde's society dramas, which try to come to grips realistically with real problems, are very nearly ruined by the fact that so many of the characters "talk like Oscar Wilde." But Wilde's specialty, the squinting epigram that is at once murderous and suicidal, is perfectly at home in Earnest. It is the verbal function of that queer double consciousness that permeates the whole play and transforms it into a kind of parody. It is quite right that Cecily, who maneuvers under the aegis of wide-eyed innocence, should say of her own journal of unspoiled reactions, "It is simply a very young girl's record of her own thoughts and impressions, and consequently meant for publication." Here burlesque of the Miranda character fuses with exposure of a grotesque type of literateuse. A similar satiric fusion takes place when Cecily discovers that her innocent "nanny," Miss Prism, is, surprisingly, one of the three-volume ladies of Richardsonian sentiment and sensation. Cecily hopes that her novel did not end happily. "The good," answers prim Miss Prism, with shrewd business prowess, "ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what fiction means."

Such passages, deftly worked into the total fabric of the comedy, hold the key to Wilde's methods and purposes. By exposing and burlesquing the vacuities of a moribund literature Wilde satirizes, too, the society that sustains and produces it; he has given us an oblique perspective on a society's shallowness through direct ridicule of the shallow art in which it sees its reflection. It is this subtle merging of matter and form that helps to make The Importance of Being Earnest an intellectual tour de force of the first order as well as one of the great comic masterpieces of the theater.

A Short Primer of Educationese

Sheldon P. Zitner

In their war against the English language, the professors of Education have employed the delays of Fabius in the grade schools. But I do not believe it has been pointed out that they have tried with the public at large the tactic of Hannibal—elephants. Anything stepped on by an elephant is likely to bear traces of the experience. So it is with