THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

OSCAR WILDE

The Importance of Being Earnest

(Annotated)

Aevum Lectio

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Text
Oscar Wilde (1854–1900); first published by Leonard Smithers, London, 1899

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To
Robert Baldwin Ross

in appreciation
in affection

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Editor's introduction

The Importance of Being Earnest opened at the St James's Theatre in London on 14 February 1895. It was Oscar Wilde's fourth comedy for the West End stage and, as events proved, his last play. Within weeks Wilde had begun a libel action against the Marquess of Queensberry; the case collapsed, he was arrested, and in May he was sentenced to two years' imprisonment. The play continued for a short while with his name removed from the advertisements, and then closed. It was published only in 1899, by Leonard Smithers, without the author's name on the title page: *By the Author of Lady Windermere's Fan*.

None of that shadow falls on the comedy itself, which is the lightest of Wilde's plays. Its subtitle, *A Trivial Comedy for Serious People*, states the joke that runs through it. Everything that Victorian society treated as weighty, such as marriage, family, religion, money and death, is handled as if it were trivial, while trivial matters, such as cucumber sandwiches, a cigarette case, the proper way to eat muffins or the choice of a Christian name, are discussed with the utmost gravity.

Two double lives

The plot rests on two deceptions. Jack Worthing, a respectable guardian in the country, has invented a wicked younger brother called Ernest, whose scrapes give him an excuse to go up to London, where he himself goes by the name of Ernest. His friend Algernon Moncrieff has invented an invalid called Bunbury, whose relapses allow him to escape dull engagements by going down to the country. Algernon gives the practice a name, Bunburying, and the word has never quite left the language.

Both men fall in love with young women who have decided in advance that they can only love a man called Ernest. The comedy grows from the collision of these fictions, and is resolved by the most improbable device of all: a hand-bag left in the cloak-room of a London railway station. The title, with its pun on *earnest* and *Ernest*, makes seriousness itself a matter of naming.

Manners as a language

Much of the pleasure of the play lies in its language. Wilde's characters speak in epigrams: short, balanced sentences that turn a familiar phrase upside down. Lady Bracknell interviews a prospective son-in-law as though she were examining a candidate for public office, and her questions about income, property and politics expose what the marriage market actually valued. Gwendolen and Cecily conduct a quarrel entirely through the rituals of afternoon tea. Miss Prism and Canon Chasuble keep up a learned flirtation in which every allusion means something else.

The notes in this edition explain the places, institutions and customs that Wilde could assume his audience knew: the London Season, the circulating libraries, the Divorce Court, the politics of the Liberal Unionists, the railway lines out of Victoria. They do not explain the jokes. A comedy of manners depends on the audience knowing the manners; once the reader knows them, the jokes take care of themselves.

Reading the play today

Critics have read the play in many ways. Some have seen in it a pure farce, a perfect machine of coincidence with no meaning beyond its own symmetry. Others have read its double lives and invented identities in the light of Wilde's own life and of the trials that followed its first performance. Others again have drawn attention to its satire of class, money and the marriage market. This edition does not choose among these readings; it

tries to give the reader what is needed to enjoy the play on its own terms, as a comedy written to be performed and heard.

The text printed here is the familiar three-act version. A note at the end describes its source and how it relates to the first edition of 1899; a short chronology of Wilde's life follows the play.

The Persons in the Play

JOHN WORTHING, J.P.
ALGERNON MONCRIEFF
REV. CANON CHASUBLE, D.D.
MERRIMAN, BUTLER
LANE, MANSERVANT
LADY BRACKNELL
HON. GWENDOLEN FAIRFAX
CECILY CARDEW
MISS PRISM, GOVERNESS

The Scenes of the Play

Act I. Algernon Moncrieff's Flat in Half-Moon Street, W.
Act II. The Garden at the Manor House, Woolton.
Act III. Drawing-Room at the Manor House, Woolton.
Time: The Present.

First performed at the St. James's Theatre, London, 14 February 1895

John Worthing, J.P.: Mr. George Alexander.
Algernon Moncrieff: Mr. Allen Aynesworth.
Rev. Canon Chasuble, D.D.: Mr. H. H. Vincent.
Merriman, Butler: Mr. Frank Dyall.
Lane, Manservant: Mr. F. Kinsey Peile.
Lady Bracknell: Miss Rose Leclercq.
Hon. Gwendolen Fairfax: Miss Irene Vanbrugh.
Cecily Cardew: Miss Evelyn Millard.
Miss Prism, Governess: Mrs. George Canninge.

The Importance of Being Earnest

ACT I

Morning-room in Algernon's flat in Half-Moon Street.[1] *The room is luxuriously and artistically furnished. The sound of a piano is heard in the adjoining room.*

[Lane is arranging afternoon tea on the table, and after the music has ceased, Algernon enters.]

ALGERNON
Did you hear what I was playing, Lane?

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

ALGERNON
I'm sorry for that, for your sake. I don't play accurately—any one can play accurately—but I play with wonderful expression. As far as the piano is concerned, sentiment is my forte. I keep science for Life.

LANE
Yes, sir.

1 A street in Mayfair, the most fashionable district of London's West End.

ALGERNON

And, speaking of the science of Life, have you got the cucumber sandwiches cut for Lady Bracknell?[2]

LANE

Yes, sir. *[Hands them on a salver.*[3]*]*

ALGERNON

[Inspects them, takes two, and sits down on the sofa.] Oh! … by the way, Lane, I see from your book that on Thursday night, when Lord Shoreman and Mr. Worthing were dining with me, eight bottles of champagne are entered as having been consumed.

LANE

Yes, sir; eight bottles and a pint.

ALGERNON

Why is it that at a bachelor's establishment the servants invariably drink the champagne? I ask merely for information.

LANE

I attribute it to the superior quality of the wine, sir. I have often observed that in married households the champagne is rarely of a first-rate brand.

ALGERNON

Good heavens! Is marriage so demoralising as that?

LANE

I believe it *is* a very pleasant state, sir. I have had very little experience of it myself up to the present. 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.

2 Thin sandwiches served at afternoon tea, the light meal taken at about five o'clock in fashionable houses.

3 A flat tray, often of silver, on which a servant hands things to guests.

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

ALGERNON
Very natural, I am sure. That will do, Lane, thank you.

LANE
Thank you, sir. *[Lane goes out.]*

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

[Enter Lane.]

LANE
Mr. Ernest Worthing.

[Enter Jack.]

[Lane goes out.]

ALGERNON
How are you, my dear Ernest? What brings you up to town?

JACK
Oh, pleasure, pleasure! What else should bring one anywhere? Eating as usual, I see, Algy!

ALGERNON
[Stiffly.] I believe it is customary in good society to take some slight refreshment at five o'clock. Where have you been since last Thursday?

JACK
[Sitting down on the sofa.] In the country.

ALGERNON
What on earth do you do there?

JACK

[Pulling off his gloves.] When one is in town one amuses oneself. When one is in the country one amuses other people. It is excessively boring.

ALGERNON

And who are the people you amuse?

JACK

[Airily.] Oh, neighbours, neighbours.

ALGERNON

Got nice neighbours in your part of Shropshire?

JACK

Perfectly horrid! Never speak to one of them.

ALGERNON

How immensely you must amuse them! *[Goes over and takes sandwich.]* By the way, Shropshire is your county, is it not?

JACK

Eh? Shropshire? Yes, of course. Hallo! Why all these cups? Why cucumber sandwiches? Why such reckless extravagance in one so young? Who is coming to tea?

ALGERNON

Oh! merely Aunt Augusta and Gwendolen.

JACK

How perfectly delightful!

ALGERNON

Yes, that is all very well; but I am afraid Aunt Augusta won't quite approve of your being here.

JACK

May I ask why?

ALGERNON

My dear fellow, the way you flirt with Gwendolen is perfectly disgraceful. It is almost as bad as the way Gwendolen flirts with you.

JACK
I am in love with Gwendolen. I have come up to town expressly to propose to her.

ALGERNON
I thought you had come up for pleasure? … I call that business.

JACK
How utterly unromantic you are!

ALGERNON
I really don't see anything romantic in proposing. It is very romantic to be in love. But there is nothing romantic about a definite proposal. Why, one may be accepted. One usually is, I believe. Then the excitement is all over. The very essence of romance is uncertainty. If ever I get married, I'll certainly try to forget the fact.

JACK
I have no doubt about that, dear Algy. The Divorce Court[4] was specially invented for people whose memories are so curiously constituted.

ALGERNON
Oh! there is no use speculating on that subject. Divorces are made in Heaven—*[Jack puts out his hand to take a sandwich. Algernon at once interferes.]* Please don't touch the cucumber sandwiches. They are ordered specially for Aunt Augusta. *[Takes one and eats it.]*

JACK
Well, you have been eating them all the time.

ALGERNON
That is quite a different matter. She is my aunt. *[Takes plate from below.]* Have some bread and butter. The bread and butter is for Gwendolen. Gwendolen is devoted to bread and butter.

4 The Court for Divorce and Matrimonial Causes, created by the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857, which allowed divorce through the courts rather than by private Act of Parliament.

JACK

[Advancing to table and helping himself.] And very good bread and butter it is too.

ALGERNON

Well, my dear fellow, you need not eat as if you were going to eat it all. You behave as if you were married to her already. You are not married to her already, and I don't think you ever will be.

JACK

Why on earth do you say that?

ALGERNON

Well, in the first place girls never marry the men they flirt with. Girls don't think it right.

JACK

Oh, that is nonsense!

ALGERNON

It isn't. It is a great truth. It accounts for the extraordinary number of bachelors that one sees all over the place. In the second place, I don't give my consent.

JACK

Your consent!

ALGERNON

My dear fellow, Gwendolen is my first cousin. And before I allow you to marry her, you will have to clear up the whole question of Cecily. *[Rings bell.]*

JACK

Cecily! What on earth do you mean? What do you mean, Algy, by Cecily! I don't know any one of the name of Cecily.

[Enter Lane.]

ALGERNON

Bring me that cigarette case Mr. Worthing left in the smoking-room the last time he dined here.

LANE
Yes, sir. *[Lane goes out.]*

JACK
Do you mean to say you have had my cigarette case all this time? I wish to goodness you had let me know. I have been writing frantic letters to Scotland Yard[5] about it. I was very nearly offering a large reward.

ALGERNON
Well, I wish you would offer one. I happen to be more than usually hard up.[6]

JACK
There is no good offering a large reward now that the thing is found.

[Enter Lane with the cigarette case on a salver. Algernon takes it at once. Lane goes out.]

ALGERNON
I think that is rather mean of you, Ernest, I must say. *[Opens case and examines it.]* However, it makes no matter, for, now that I look at the inscription inside, I find that the thing isn't yours after all.

JACK
Of course it's mine. *[Moving to him.]* You have seen me with it a hundred times, and you have no right whatsoever to read what is written inside. It is a very ungentlemanly thing to read a private cigarette case.

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

5 The headquarters of London's Metropolitan Police, and by extension the police force itself.
6 Short of money.

JACK

I am quite aware of the fact, and I don't propose to discuss modern culture. It isn't the sort of thing one should talk of in private. I simply want my cigarette case back.

ALGERNON

Yes; but this isn't your cigarette case. This cigarette case is a present from some one of the name of Cecily, and you said you didn't know any one of that name.

JACK

Well, if you want to know, Cecily happens to be my aunt.

ALGERNON

Your aunt!

JACK

Yes. Charming old lady she is, too. Lives at Tunbridge Wells.[7] Just give it back to me, Algy.

ALGERNON

[Retreating to back of sofa.] But why does she call herself little Cecily if she is your aunt and lives at Tunbridge Wells? *[Reading.]* 'From little Cecily with her fondest love.'

JACK

[Moving to sofa and kneeling upon it.] My dear fellow, what on earth is there in that? Some aunts are tall, some aunts are not tall. That is a matter that surely an aunt may be allowed to decide for herself. You seem to think that every aunt should be exactly like your aunt! That is absurd! For Heaven's sake give me back my cigarette case. *[Follows Algernon round the room.]*

ALGERNON

Yes. But why does your aunt call you her uncle? 'From little Cecily, with her fondest love to her dear Uncle Jack.' There is no objection, I admit, to an aunt being a small aunt, but why an aunt, no matter what her size may be, should call her own

7 A spa town in Kent, south-east of London, associated with respectable, retired gentility.

nephew her uncle, I can't quite make out. Besides, your name isn't Jack at all; it is Ernest.

JACK

It isn't Ernest; it's Jack.

ALGERNON

You have always told me it was Ernest. I have introduced you to every one as Ernest. You answer to the name of Ernest. You look as if your name was Ernest. You are the most earnest-looking person I ever saw in my life. It is perfectly absurd your saying that your name isn't Ernest. It's on your cards. Here is one of them. *[Taking it from case.]* 'Mr. Ernest Worthing, B. 4, The Albany.'[8] I'll keep this as a proof that your name is Ernest if ever you attempt to deny it to me, or to Gwendolen, or to any one else. *[Puts the card in his pocket.]*

JACK

Well, my name is Ernest in town and Jack in the country, and the cigarette case was given to me in the country.

ALGERNON

Yes, but that does not account for the fact that your small Aunt Cecily, who lives at Tunbridge Wells, calls you her dear uncle. Come, old boy, you had much better have the thing out at once.

JACK

My dear Algy, you talk exactly as if you were a dentist. It is very vulgar to talk like a dentist when one isn't a dentist. It produces a false impression.

ALGERNON

Well, that is exactly what dentists always do. Now, go on! Tell me the whole thing. I may mention that I have always suspected you of being a confirmed and secret Bunburyist;[9] and I am quite sure of it now.

8 Albany, a building of exclusive bachelor apartments off Piccadilly.

9 Algernon's own coinage, explained a few lines below: one who invents an imaginary person as an excuse to escape social duties.

JACK
Bunburyist? What on earth do you mean by a Bunburyist?

ALGERNON
I'll reveal to you the meaning of that incomparable expression as soon as you are kind enough to inform me why you are Ernest in town and Jack in the country.

JACK
Well, produce my cigarette case first.

ALGERNON
Here it is. *[Hands cigarette case.]* Now produce your explanation, and pray make it improbable. *[Sits on sofa.]*

JACK
My dear fellow, there is nothing improbable about my explanation at all. In fact it's perfectly ordinary. Old Mr. Thomas Cardew, who adopted me when I was a little boy, made me in his will guardian to his grand-daughter, Miss Cecily Cardew. Cecily, who addresses me as her uncle from motives of respect that you could not possibly appreciate, lives at my place in the country under the charge of her admirable governess, Miss Prism.

ALGERNON
Where is that place in the country, by the way?

JACK
That is nothing to you, dear boy. You are not going to be invited … I may tell you candidly that the place is not in Shropshire.

ALGERNON
I suspected that, my dear fellow! I have Bunburyed all over Shropshire on two separate occasions. Now, go on. Why are you Ernest in town and Jack in the country?

JACK
My dear Algy, I don't know whether you will be able to understand my real motives. You are hardly serious enough. When one is placed in the position of guardian, one has to adopt a