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The Ascendance of the Trivial: *The Importance of Being Earnest* as Seen through the Lens of Festival Comedy

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The world of *The Importance of Being Earnest* is an essential trivial one. The Oxford English Dictionary tells us that, in the common modern usage, to be trivial is to be “of small account, little esteemed, paltry, poor; trifling, inconsiderable, unimportant, slight.” The things of importance in *Earnest* tend to be trivial in this respect, be they a name or a cigarette case. An older definition of the word is “belonging to the Trivium of medieval university studies.” The trivium describes the three lesser of the liberal arts, namely rhetoric, grammar, and logic. In this sense *Earnest* is only partially trivial. Rhetoric there is much of: the bright play of wit and jest is tribute to Wilde’s fine skill with words. Grammar is also dealt with, in its own small way, in the dichotomy between the Earnest of the title and the Ernest Cecily and Gwendolyn are in love with. When it comes to Logic, however, *Earnest* falls lamentably short. The entire situation is mildly illogical, with the fantastical ideas of Bunburying and the supremely ridiculous twist of the baby in the handbag. If one ignores the ludicrous situations, however, the play is logical within its own context; that is, the characters act in a fashion that is in keeping with the logic of the play, strange though that logic may be. In fact, the very triviality of the values of the characters in *The Importance of Being Earnest* is what makes their logic so entertaining. It is the importance placed on the trivialities of life, especially as juxtaposed with the carelessness that Wilde displays to traditionally serious values, that creates an essential illogic in the world. Like the festival comedy of his predecessors, Wilde deals with a world that is inverted, but unlike other festival comedy, the inversion is permanent and pertaining to ideology rather than social structure.

Festival comedy evolved from the medieval feast day, the only sanctioned time for laughter and gaiety in church-dominated society. Bakhtin describes the festivals in his “Rabelais and his World,” observing that they focus on an inverted society, where the lower classes of society rise up to become, for the duration of the festival, the upper classes. Figures of authority are replaced by fools and idiots, sense gives way to nonsense, and everyone can feast and make merry. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde replaces not the figures of authority, but the values. In so doing, he brings his festival world closer to the reality of his audience, and thus makes the inverted values of the world in the play a comment on the values of the society it inverts.

As a comedy of manners, the plot of *Earnest* naturally deals with romance and marriage, if not quite in the standard romantic language. “Divorces are made in Heaven” (Wilde, p. 3) one of the characters declaims with apparent seriousness, inverting the common aphorism. Throughout the play marriage, that essential tie for the continuation of the species, which even in comedy usually retains its place as a central theme, is trivialized and downplayed. Though the play ends in proper comedic fashion, with a collection of engagements, none of these are approached with the seriousness that romantic comedy demands. Algernon and Cecily, particularly, are lacking in closure. Algernon is the author of the aforementioned quote on divorce, and makes several other comments degrading marriage in the first act, and never officially changes his opinion. Similarly, Cecily has a highly romantic view of both marriage and Ernest, which never undergoes any revision. The static nature of their opinions, when combined with the superficiality of those opinions makes a mockery of such a serious institution. The state of being married is treated equally lightly. Algernon even declares that if he ever did get

married, he would “certainly try and forget the fact” (Wilde, p. 3), a comment that again, he never retracts. Similarly, Lady Bracknell only makes infrequent, passing references to her husband, who never appears on stage and leads a life completely separate from his wife and daughter, if Lady Bracknell’s declaration that she “never undeceived him on any question” (Wilde, p. 45) is to be believed.

The necessity of Lady Bracknell undeceiving her husband on the whereabouts of her daughter, as well as his absence from the stage and plot, establish Lady Bracknell in the dominant position in their relationship. Certainly a dictatorial female, it is not surprising that she rules her household and husband, but a man’s ideal Victorian home is his castle, not his wife’s. This inversion of gender roles is perpetuated throughout the couples in the show, with the female characters being, in general, much more assertive than their male counterparts. When Jack proposes to Gwendolyn, she is commanding the entire scene according to her own ideas of the convention of the situation. Similarly, Cecily is one step ahead of Algernon in her pre-emptive engagement. Both women also control their partners’ identities, as they declare, “Your Christian names are still an insurmountable barrier!” (p. 44), forcing both Algernon and Jack to choose to be re-christened Ernest. Gwendolyn and Cecily’s fascination with the name Ernest, even beyond their love for their prospective partners, is also an inversion of the well-developed romantic ideal of love conquering all. Great romantic heroines may find the name and family of their lovers immaterial, but Cecily and Gwendolyn stand by the notion that Ernest, and only Ernest, is a valid name for a husband. This determination is a sly inversion of its own, taunting the sentimentalism and melodrama of Victorian theater.

The feminine domination of relationships in *Earnest* is presented subtly, without directly challenging social norms. Gwendolyn and Cecily only control Jack and Algernon through the feminine privilege of declining an offer of marriage, rather than usurping any of the masculine roles. Even Lady Bracknell's organization of her daughter's life and marriage is not entirely unexpected in a society where arranged marriages were, if not the norm, at least still somewhat common. Lady Bracknell acknowledges her lack of control over her male nephew by her observation that "Algernon, of course, may choose for himself" (Wilde, p. 50). Since this comment is delivered after she has approved his choice for a wife, it is doubtful she would actually allow Algernon to do as he chose. However, the fact she says it, and the use of the phrase "of course," indicate that insincere though she may be in sentiment, she acknowledges that her control of Algernon must be by force of personality alone, as society, even the skewed society of the play, gives her no real control over him.

Algernon, of all the characters, is both the greatest proponent of the frivolity of the society he inhabits, and the most aware of its triviality. He tells Lady Bracknell, in a rare moment of incivility, "I don't care twopence about social possibilities" (p. 47). Since Lady Bracknell has been discussing the fashionable way to wear one's chin, the audience has some sympathy for Algernon's irritation with the importance Lady Bracknell is placing on such a trivial issue, while true love is at stake. This sudden sympathy is unexpected, as Algernon has been trivializing the very notion of marriage and true love since the first scene, while upholding the trivial values of his society. Jack accuses Algernon of "never talk[ing] anything but nonsense" (Wilde, p. 19), to which Algernon replies, "Nobody ever does" (Wilde, p. 19). This declaration, which ends the

first act, goes unchallenged. The implication that is left for the audience to digest during intermission is that no one speaks sense, ever. Or rather, no one speaks sense in the world of *Earnest*, which is not quite the same as the real world, no matter how much they may overlap.

Meeting Cecily, theoretically his true love, has no effect on Algernon's essential triviality, as he continues to place more importance on the minor things in his life, such as muffins, than the important, such as his failed engagement. However careless of his relationships he may be, Algernon is serious about food. Food, while essential for the maintenance of life, is, for the upper classes described in *Earnest*, a trivial and ornamental matter, existing as much for social commentary as for sustenance. When supposing themselves both to be engaged to the same man, Gwendolyn and Cecily trade barbs over afternoon tea, using their positions as hostess and guest to subtly insult one another. Food, here, is a way for Gwendolyn to look down on Cecily, and the control of the teapot as hostess is one of the few outlets the younger and less sophisticated Cecily has to reply to her tormenter. Neither actually consumes anything this scene, as the food is a trivial detail with which the women can politely express their dislike. Algernon, however, actually consumes the leftover food, "calmly eating muffins when we [Jack and Algernon] are in this horrible trouble" (Wilde, p. 41). It has been argued that Algernon's consumption of the muffins represents his suppressed desire for Cecily, but it can also be taken as a continuation of the importance he places on the less important things in life. When distressed, Algernon claims to "refuse everything but food and drink" (Wilde, p. 41), with the implication that food is comforting not for its sustaining values, but because

of its triviality. He has linked his inability to eat muffins in an agitated manner with the state of his shirtsleeves, an even more trivial detail when confronted with crossed love.

The importance of food in *Earnest* reflects the festival atmosphere of the text, as festival comedy is linked to feast days and the food and carnival they inspired in the medieval period. Algernon's obsession with food can be seen as part of the festival inversion of the play, as he is the most vocal in his trivialization of serious values. Since food is a trivial ideal elevated to serious by the production, Algernon's comments on the importance of eating can be taken as a reinforcement of the inversion of world the characters inhabit. While Algernon sets up the festival air with his multiple inverted aphorisms, he is one of the few characters who chooses to imagine world beyond the scope and triviality of the play. His declaration to Lady Bracknell about society and his response to Jack's accusation of nonsense show his acknowledgment of the triviality of the world he inhabits. Throughout the play, Algernon has been supporting the inverted logic and values of the world of the play, and his disavowal of the frivolity of society can be read as a criticism of said society. The overlap of the real world with the world of *Earnest* is large enough that the subtle differences and inversions turn the festival into a bitingly subtle satire, as the audience begins to suspect their own society suffering from the same inversion the society of the play does. Lady Bracknell informs that Algernon that he should "never speak disrespectfully of Society ... [o]nly people who can't get into it do that." (Wilde, p. 47). The society to which Lady Bracknell refers is the society of the festival, that inverted world that Algernon has been at such pains to describe to us. But that society deserves, in many ways, to be spoken ill of, and her immediate rejection

of this necessity encourages the audience to consider the possible redress of their own society, in hopes that they will not find it an image of the society in the play.

While the festival aspects of *The Importance of Being Earnest* serve to accentuate the satire, the play diverges from the carnivalesque in a number of ways, the most important of which is the unending nature of the festival world. In general, festivals are of a fixed duration and location, an isolated feast in the church year when the usual rules are relaxed. In *Earnest*, however, Wilde creates a festival world that has no end, and no beginning. The world is trivial when Algernon and Lane discuss marriage in the opening scene; it is equally trivial to find that Jack and Gwendolyn put such importance on his being Earnest in the closing scene. There is never any indication that there is a nontrivial world beyond the context of the play. This lack of conclusion accentuates the feeling that the world the characters are describing, and that the audience is laughing at, is somehow the real world. The festival the characters exist in is not a festival to them; it is the whole world and all of time. If one considers the play a self-sustaining world, the implication is that one person's reality can be another person's inverted festival world. By not concluding the festival, Wilde implies that his characters are talking about a real world, and it is the real world that the audience is laughing at.

Another essential aspect of the feast day is the breakdown of class boundaries and the mixing of all races, castes and genders. In *Earnest*, however, the different social strata stay firmly in place. Even Jack, who through most of the play could have been born the child of anyone, was raised a gentleman, acts as a gentleman, and in good dramatic coincidence, is confirmed as a gentleman by birth in the final scene. The

servants and dependents in *Earnest* remain invariably servile and obedient. The only reference to any social change is Lady Bracknell's passing comment,

“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.”
(Wilde, p. 45)

By Lady Bracknell's standards, social change is not important, morbid and perhaps mildly ridiculous. When *Earnest* was published in 1899, there was no great political upheaval in London, but the Irish Question remained unsolved. As an Irishman, always fighting the English prejudices against the Irish, Wilde would be sensitive to the social climate of the time, would have to be careful in any championship of his countrymen. By mocking the social politics, Wilde does not offend his audience, who might espouse Lady Bracknell's view of sociopolitical disturbances. If, however, one considers the other topics Wilde mocks, such as marriage and love, this quote suggests social activism is to be encouraged, as the characters, whose value system is the inversion of our own, disdain social legislation and its explosive consequences.

Social activism and inversion are not, in fact, encouraged by the lower class characters, who are so one-dimensional so as to be almost caricatures. Lane is the wooden-faced butler, too proud to ever comment on the peccadilloes of his master, but eternally loyal. Lane has not been paid wages for some time, but he chooses to remain with Algernon for mysterious reasons of his own. Dr. Chasuble is barely more than the one-dimensional sketch of a minister; even his name simply refers to the outermost vestments of a minister, rather than relating to his personality or family. Both Lane and Dr. Chasuble are static characters, with no suggestion of character development. They are both incapable of social mobility, as they are too static themselves to have any

motivation to change the status quo. While Wilde leaves the servants firmly in their positions, he also elevates them to the position of role model by Algernon, when he observes,

“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.”
(Wilde, p. 2)

In the real world, the moral responsibility is on the part of the upper classes to provide an example for their social inferiors. It is fitting then, that in the world of *Earnest*, the lower classes are expected to provide an example for their superiors. Besides emphasizing the inversion of values, this comment, like the rest of the inverted aphorisms, is worryingly accurate in the closeness to reality.

The crowning triviality of *The Importance of the Being Earnest* is, of course, the sheer importance of being Ernest. The future happiness of all four main characters depends on the identity of a character who is completely fictional. The festive is often concerned with mistaken identities, but Wilde adds a new degree of complexity by making the mistake intentional. As the festival is full of kings pretending to be beggars, and beggars pretending to be kings, *Earnest* presents worthy Jack Worthing pretending to be his disreputable brother in the city, and Algernon Moncrieff pretending to be the same disreputable brother in the country. Though they could both choose to travel as themselves, the characters feel the need to hide their actions and identities from the society they visit. As Ernest, they are able to break the social boundaries they are confined to as Jack and Algernon. As Algernon points out, his own creation, a certain invalid by the name of Bunbury, is a wonderful excuse for missing family dinners with his Aunt Augusta. Algernon uses Bunbury to dodge dinner engagements and escape the

restrictions of society, but Algernon is the first to acknowledge that Jack is the more accomplished Bunburyist at the outset. Jack, after all, has not only created an imaginary brother as an excuse to leave his duties in the country, but actually becomes Ernest when he travels to town.

Truth is not the absolute ideal in *Earnest* that it is in the real world; like the other values discussed, the truth is given secondary importance to social ambitions and convenience. Lady Bracknell derides the truth as being calculating, especially with respect to the image a woman presents to the world. Complete truth finds no favor with society. On the other hand, Cecily and Gwendolyn break off their respective engagements upon learning that neither Jack nor Algernon is really Ernest. The made-up world has become, at this point, more desirable than the world as they know it. Fortunately, both men's willingness to give up his previous identity for the sake of the marriage is sufficient to redeem him in his lady's eyes. When considering the question of secrecy and identity in Wilde's work, it is impossible to avoid considering his own difficulties in this direction. As a bisexual in an aggressively heterosexual society, Wilde was, in a way, always pretending to be someone he was not. In *Earnest*, it is possible to become the person one pretends to be, by a twist of fate and poetic license; in the real world, it is harder.

Bakhtin observes: "one of the indispensable elements of the folk festival was travesty, that is, the renewal ... of the social image" (Bakhtin, p. 81). In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde uses the inversion of social norms of a festival to present a world in which change is possible. Because it is the world of a festival, with all the inherent instability of such, social issues can be addressed and changed, at least for the day.

Because in *Earnest*, the festival is unending, the changes can be permanent. The changes in social image Wilde wishes to effect with his “Trivial Comedy for Serious People” are shown in the particular opinions Wilde chooses to invert and not to invert. The ideals that are trivialized in *Earnest*, such as traditional notions of marriage, society, and masculinity, can be seen as being presented for redress. The satiric bent of the overlap between the festival inversion and the real world implies that these ideas are trivialized in the truth as well as in the production. If the festival is a time to present ideas for redress, the creation of an unending festival suggests that continuous change would be worth trying as well. On a more personal level, the play supports change in allowing Jack to evolve into his fantasy rather than requiring him to work for his privileges. The authorial manipulation of circumstances creates a world in which one can become one’s hidden self. As a festival satire presenting problems for redress to a strict society, this calls for a relaxation of the laws that require one to hide one’s desires behind a Bunbury.

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