

# Satire and Fantasy in Wilde's 'The Importance of Being Earnest'

ROBERT J. JORDAN

THE efforts of critics to rescue *The Importance of Being Earnest* from the triviality that Wilde claimed for it have led in recent years to two approaches. On the one hand Wilde's epigrammatic wit is analysed as an instrument of social criticism and the play is elevated to seriousness as a satire.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand its fantasy is viewed as an expression of the author's aesthetic creed and so is accorded the dignity of a philosophy.<sup>2</sup> The aim of this article is to consider aspects of both the satire and the fantasy, although the greater weight will be given to the latter as the more important of the two elements.

The form of wit that lends particular support to the claim of social significance is that used to describe Lady Harbury's widowhood, 'I never saw a woman so altered; she looks quite twenty years younger'.<sup>3</sup> In such a comment the platitudinous phrases embodying some conventional sentiment on morality or social behaviour are taken, one or two words (preferably towards the end) are altered, and the whole thing is blown sky-high. A sense of security is created as the tired, familiar words roll out and then suddenly comes the jolt. Instead of the conventional sentiment comes, more often than not, its complete negation, and the shock is all the greater because this inversion of the platitude often sounds just as plausible a record of human attitudes as the platitude itself. Since the very existence of the *cliché* in the first

<sup>1</sup> For example, Eric Bentley, *The Playwright as Thinker*, New York, 1958, pp. 140-5, Richard Foster, 'Wilde as Parodist: A Second Look at *The Importance of Being Earnest*', *College English*, xviii, 1956, 18-23 and Otto Reinert, 'Satiric Strategy in *The Importance of Being Earnest*', *ibid.*, pp. 14-18.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Harold E. Toliver, 'Wilde and the Importance of "Sincere and Studied Triviality"', *Modern Drama*, v, 1962-3, 389-99, and Arthur Ganz, 'The Meaning of *The Importance of Being Earnest*', *Modern Drama*, vi, 1963-4, 42-52.

<sup>3</sup> *The Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. G. F. Maine, 1953, p. 327. All later references are to this edition.

place implies a standard and largely unquestioned attitude to the particular subject it deals with, this explosion of the *cliché* becomes an attack on the illusions and the hypocrisies of men.

As a trick of speech this device, no matter how recurrent, is open to the criticism that it has merely an incidental role in the play. By its means, touches of satire appear in the dialogue but the overall fabric (the manoeuvres of the plot and the behaviour of the characters) is unaffected. It can be argued, however, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, that the trick extends beyond the dialogue, for an analagous device does appear at the broader level. The most striking manifestation at this level is to be found in the treatment of the relationship of the sexes. In this play are two sophisticated young gentlemen and two respectable young ladies. The normal expectation is that the young ladies will be delicate, romantic, dependent, and the young men will be sufficiently practical and experienced in the ways of the world to act as protectors for the young ladies — that they will have all the talents that high society demands of the escorts for its young women. Moreover, such an expectation does not seem unwarranted. Jack's serious manner and Algy's slightly cynical, slightly rakish worldliness seem to confirm that in their different ways these young men will have this social masterfulness.

But these expectations are completely flouted. The refined young ladies turn out to be hard-headed, cold-blooded, efficient and completely self-possessed and the young gentlemen simply crumple in front of them. Jack attempts a proposal of marriage, fluffs it, and finds Gwendolen taking the whole proceeding out of his hands and telling him what to do. Algy arrives in the country to have a flirtation with a country innocent and finds himself peremptorily assigned a role as *fiancé* in a relationship that the lady has organized for herself. It is the expectation of both women that their loved ones will be called Ernest and on this issue they are completely inflexible. The men wilt before their determination and are forced to scuttle around looking for a way of satisfying them.

This inverted relationship is the norm of the play. It is repeated in the Chasuble-Prism relationship where Chasuble is completely passive, and Prism the (somewhat bumbling) pursuer. The clearest example, however, is provided by the predicament of

Lord Bracknell who, of course, never appears — whose non-appearance is indeed fitting, almost symbolic, since he is practically a non-person. He is the complete cypher, so dominated by his female relatives that Gwendolen can use the trick of the inverted platitude and describe him in the phrases that customarily justify the stay-at-home woman:

Outside the family circle, papa, I am glad to say, is entirely unknown. I think that is quite as it should be. The home seems to me to be the proper sphere for the man. And certainly once a man begins to neglect his domestic duties he becomes painfully effeminate, does he not? (p. 351)

We are taught that female submissiveness was one of the bulwarks of Victorian upper-middle-class society and here we see that article of faith being mocked as a sham. If the inverted platitude at the level of dialogue can be claimed as part of a satiric vision then so too can the comparable inversion in the very fabric of the play.

But even if this satiric device is structural in the play it can hardly be said to provide a satire of any great power. The main objection is that the particular inversion that is offered to us here is a common-place of social criticism at the time the play was written. *The Importance of Being Earnest*, after all, is a product of the age of the New Woman — the suffrage movement, the rational clothes movement, women in sport, women at the universities and so on. If a journal such as *Punch* shows a consistent interest in 'Oscar', 'Daubaway Weirdsley' and the Decadence its concern with the New Woman could be said to be positively obsessive. There is not an issue in the 1894-5 period without some joke or comment on the subject and sometimes there are as many as half a dozen, most of them turning on the often objectionable forcefulness of the modern woman as opposed to the mere male. There is, for example, the cartoon of cowed and diminutive Tibbins whose wife has been asked to resign from the Omphale Club for ungentlemanly conduct,<sup>1</sup> or the picture of a fine handsome young woman asking the elegant monocled young man if she might carry his bag for him,<sup>2</sup> or verses such as the following, particularly interesting in relation to Lord Bracknell:

<sup>1</sup> *Punch*, cviii, 1895, 11.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, cvi, 1894, 90

MAMMA is a judge of divorces,  
 Sister ANNE is a learned Q.C.,  
 ELIZA is great upon horses,  
 And DORA a thriving M.D.  
 Aunt JANE is a popular preacher,  
 Aunt SUSAN a dealer in stocks,  
 While Father, the gentlest old creature,  
 Attends to the family socks.

\* \* \*

I'm to marry a girl in the City,  
 She allows me a hundred a year  
 To dress on, and make myself pretty,  
 And keep me in baccy and beer.  
 The duties? — Oh, as for the duties,  
 You can possibly guess what they are;  
 And I warrant the boys will be beauties  
 That are destined to call me Papa.<sup>1</sup>

In the case of Gwendolen, moreover, we appear to have not only this general situation but also specific echoes of the New Woman. Gwendolen apparently attends university extension lectures (p. 360) and she talks glibly of 'metaphysical speculations' (p. 329) and 'German scepticism' (p. 359) so that Jack, who is in some awe of her, can speak of her as an 'intellectual girl' (p. 337). This erudition, together with her cold masterfulness, strongly suggests the standard satire on one variety of the New Woman.

Social criticism, then, though it is present in the action as well as the dialogue of the play, is still of no great power. In spite of it the heart of the work is elsewhere. If at one level the play is a social satire and at another it is a farce, at the most important level it seems to be a fantasy in which unattainable human ideals are allowed to realize themselves.

The most obvious ideal presented in the play is the dream of elegance, of effortlessly achieved grace and formal perfection. The aspiration here is stated explicitly in a whole series of paradoxes in which form or style is elevated above truth or virtue, notably in the exchange in the first few minutes of Act Three (p. 359). It is realized dramatically in the delicate symmetry of the plot, with its balanced characters and situations, and in the polish of the dialogue and the elegant chiselling of the

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, CVII, 1894, 22.

epigrams. Many of these epigrams may use social comment as their material but it can be argued that in such cases the brilliance of the effect is ultimately more striking than the pungency of the criticism.

This element in the play has been much analysed, especially in relation to the cult of the dandy and the aesthetic creed that underlies him.<sup>1</sup> There is, however, another aspect of the idealization. One of the things about the world of the play is its innocence. This is a world many of whose characters seem completely indifferent to morality, but at the same time it is a world without evil. The absence of a moral sense, then, does not let loose sin and degradation, because to a large extent these things do not exist, except as unemotional abstractions. Miss Prism may have to warn her charge not to read certain 'sensational' parts of a book but what endangers Cecily in this innocent world is not corrupting sexual outspokenness. It is the fallen Rupee, not the tall woman, that threatens to disturb her (p. 340).

Now if the play's opening situation were being treated realistically, innocence is one of the last things to be expected, for what we are presented with are two young men who are leading double lives, lives of outward social conformity coupled with lives devoted to secret pleasures. In the normal course of things this would almost inevitably imply sexual licence cloaked by Victorian hypocrisy, and at least two of the standard centres for the gentleman debauchee, Paris and the Empire Music Hall, receive passing mention in the text.<sup>2</sup> But whatever the normal expectation the behaviour of Jack and Algy that we actually witness is infinitely removed from this world of sexual corruption. By taking up the 'secret life' pattern the play is in a sense flirting with the possibilities of sex but when it comes to the point all such areas of experience are rigorously excluded. We watch as Algy goes on what might well be a sexual adventure, his descent on Jack's country house, but what results is completely innocuous.

<sup>1</sup> See the articles cited in footnote 2, above.

<sup>2</sup> Paris, of course, is the scene of Ernest's alleged death in Act II, and the Empire is considered as a place of entertainment by Jack and Algy on p. 335. The play was being written at the time of Mrs Ormiston Chant's campaign directed against the famous promenade attached to this theatre and notorious as a venue for high-class prostitutes.

However, while Algy may be a sexual innocent, he does reveal appetite in another form. In Act I he indulges himself with an entire plate of cucumber sandwiches, and in Act II the barrier breaks again and he wolfs the greater part of a plate of muffins. The role of this food-lust as a vice appears more clearly in the four-act version of the play where Dr Chasuble declares that Jack should not pay 'Ernest's' supper debts because it 'would be encouraging his profligacy',<sup>1</sup> while Miss Prism, having declared on the same page that 'There can be little good in any young man who eats so much, and so often', later remarks that 'to partake of two luncheons in one day would not be liberty. It would be licence'.<sup>2</sup> In a sense, then, Algy is lustful, but his lust is innocence itself.

This innocent vice does, however, suggest something. It is the vice, the wickedness of the child. Algernon is the naughty little boy who eats all the goodies. And in this lies a clue to this innocence which is central to the play as fantasy. All the young people are terribly elegant, exquisitely sophisticated adults. But much of their behaviour and many of their attitudes are redolent of the world of the child.

Consider, for example, Cecily. To begin with, we first hear of her as 'little Cecily' who has given a present to her dear uncle (p. 324). Then, when we first meet her it is in the presence of her governess. It is quite possible that a girl of her age would still be studying under a private tutor, but uncle, tutor and the adjective little all suggest something of the child. Furthermore the main impression that is made in that scene in which we first see her is that little Cecily doesn't like school. As she herself expresses it, 'Horrid Political Economy! Horrid Geography! Horrid, horrid German' (p. 340). Added to this somewhat stage-juvenile mode of expression is the fact that she cannot spell 'cough' (p. 347) and indeed, that the letters she had written to herself were all badly spelled (p. 349). It can also be argued that her impatience and the way it is expressed is evocative of the child. At the prospect of having to wait seventeen years to marry she declares, 'I couldn't wait all that time. I hate waiting even five minutes for anybody. It always makes me rather cross' (p. 364).

<sup>1</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The original Four-Act Version of 'The Importance of Being Earnest'*, 1957, p. 52.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

In Cecily's case the childlike qualities are omni-present. Elsewhere they are not so persistent, but if this idea of the characters as child-adults is considered, a point of reference may be found for many of their most characteristic responses. Much of the quarrelling in the play, for example, has the quality of children's tiffs, and a childlike petulance is a recurrent note. It is illustrated in the lovers' quarrel at the end of Act II and the beginning of Act III, while the petulance by itself is perfectly revealed at the end of Act I where we see Jack and Algy trying to decide how they will amuse themselves that evening:

ALGERNON: What shall we do after dinner? Go to a theatre?

JACK: Oh, no! I loathe listening.

ALGERNON: Well, let us go to the Club?

JACK: Oh, no! I hate talking.

ALGERNON: Well, we might trot round to the Empire at ten?

JACK: Oh, no! I can't bear looking at things. It is so silly.

ALGERNON: Well, what shall we do?

JACK: Nothing!

ALGERNON: It is awfully hard work doing nothing. (p. 335)

This is extraordinarily like the *cliché* of a spoilt child sulkily refusing to play the various games suggested by a friend. Indeed, children's games are evoked by a whole series of features in the play. A significant part of the action is the playing of 'pretend' games — Algy's Bunbury, Jack's Ernest, Cecily's *fiancé* — all involving imaginary characters who can, if need be, be killed off when they begin to get in the way of the game. There is also a great concern with the rules of the game — Algy insisting on telling Jack how to play Bunburying, Gwendolen instructing Jack how to propose properly, Cecily insisting on the correct forms and procedures from Algy. Moreover not only because of these games but also because of the general attitude to life the one sin that is more frequent in the play than gluttony is the equally childish one of 'telling fibs'. When Jack makes his grave charges against Algy's moral character to Lady Bracknell this is the substance of them (p. 363), and yet earlier Jack himself had been made to squirm when caught out in a major lie — indicating at the time that lying was his unvarying practice (p. 355).

Throughout the play there is a scattering of bland falsehoods on minor issues (the unavailability of cucumbers, little Aunt Cecily of Tunbridge Wells) and there is always, of course, the series of paradoxes referred to earlier, in which the stylish lie is said to be preferable to the truth. In view of all these intimations of childhood, then, it is significant that some of the broader jokes in the play spring directly from the involvement of the characters in childish situations — the preoccupation with christening, for example, or Jack rushing into the arms of Miss Prism with a cry of ‘mother’ (p. 367).

Of course not everybody in the play has these qualities of the child. Lady Bracknell, for example, is very much the adult — the person of irresistible authority and power who interrupts the games to demand what is going on. Jack in particular is in complete awe of her and looks on her as the immensely older person — to him she is someone who must be well over one hundred and fifty (p. 334). The other adults in the play are Chasuble and Miss Prism, the latter being for a few fleeting seconds Jack’s mother. With these two, adulthood is characterized partly by authority and age but much more so by the way the aura of innocence does not extend to them. Their conversation, particularly in the scene in which they are first established on stage, is marked by its uneasy undertones of sexuality — ‘hang upon her lips’ (p. 339), ‘metaphor . . . drawn from bees’ (p. 339), ‘young women are green’ (p. 342). Indeed Miss Prism’s pointed reference to an unmarried man as a ‘permanent public temptation’ (p. 342) cannot even be dismissed as an undertone.

There is, then, an atmosphere of innocence and freedom from corruption in this play that is in part created by insinuations of the child-like into the manners and attitudes of the characters. The child as embodiment of innocence and of the creative imagination is one of the obsessive nineteenth-century symbols<sup>1</sup> and that Wilde himself has an interest in the world of children is implied in his experiments with the fairy-tale as a literary form. It might even be possible to claim that the element of the childlike in this play is an extension of the cult of youth that is a significant part of his thinking and that dictates sayings such as ‘The condition of perfection is idleness: the aim of perfection is youth’

<sup>1</sup> Peter Coveney, *Poor Monkey: The Child in Literature*, 1957.



(p. 1114). In any case children have a quality apart from their innocence that might well recommend them to Wilde, their ability to approach their own fantasies and their own trivial pastimes with intense gravity and seriousness. Part of the play's philosophy, after all, is allegedly that 'we should treat all the trivial things of life seriously'.<sup>1</sup>

In this analysis of the play's fantasy two strands, elegance and innocence, have been distinguished. In fact they are not without relevance to one another. The perfection of elegance is best achieved in the absence of strong human emotion or of moral intensity since the presence of such fervour is likely to ruffle the elegance or make it appear, by comparison, trivial and futile. The pint-sized passions of Wilde's characters (petulance, hunger, impatience), together with their lack of moral concern thus create an atmosphere congenial to the flowering of the sophisticated manner. But at the same time some down-to-earth awareness of the tensions or weaknesses of humanity can serve a useful purpose in such a context and it is here that the social satire, the material of much of the elegant wit, has its place in the fantasy world. This conjunction of mild satire and fantasy in fact represents a fairly basic piece of literary tact. It enables the author to have his fantasy and at the same time to indicate his awareness of the imperfection of the world as it really is, to prevent the charge of *naïveté* by demonstrating an acute sense of things as they are and to brace the self-indulgence by surrounding it with laughter.

<sup>1</sup> Hesketh Pearson, *The Life of Oscar Wilde*, 1954, p. 255.

#### *ARIEL, Volume 1, Number 4*

The October issue will contain 'The poetry of John Hamilton Reynolds' by Robert Gittings; 'Edward Lear: man of letters' by Joanna Richardson; 'The origins of the Elegy' by Peter Watson-Smyth; 'The Poetry of Walter de la Mare' by John Press; 'Some Recent Dickens Criticism and Scholarship' by George Wing; 'Elkin Mathews, Poets' Publisher' by Patricia Hutchins; 'The critical revolution of T. S. Eliot' by Roger Sharrock; and 'British and Indian Images of India' by M. Bryn Davies.