It is generally agreed that *The Importance of Being Earnest* is Oscar Wilde's masterpiece, but there is little agreement on why it should be thought so or on how it works as a play. Though we can sense a solid substance beneath the frothy surface, the nature of that substance remains an enigma. Surprisingly little real criticism has been written about the play, and much of that which has is sketchy or tedious. One of the few critics whose mind seems to have been genuinely engaged by the play is Mary McCarthy, but she has written about it only briefly, and despite her admiration clearly finds it repugnant. "It has the character of a ferocious idyll," she says, and complains that "Selfishness and servility are the moral alternatives presented." ¹ Most of what she says about the play cannot be denied, yet there is a wrong note somewhere. Though it is almost always feeble to complain about critics using the wrong standards, I think we have to do so here. *The Importance of Being Earnest* does not tackle problems of moral conduct in the way that most plays do. In it, Wilde expresses a comic vision of the human condition by deliberately distorting actuality and having most of the characters behave as if that vision were all but universal. It is fair enough to complain about the vision entire, but to complain simply about the selfishness, without asking what it suggests, is on a par with complaining about the immorality of *Tom Jones*.

Though McCarthy uses the wrong standards, and therefore sees the play through a distorting lens, what she sees is there and needs to be

studied. Her notion about the play's advocacy of selfishness may be got into better focus if we compare it with what William Empson says about the heroes of Restoration comedy: "There is an obscure paradox that the selfish man is the generous one, because he is not repressed, has 'good nature', and so on." This seems to represent more accurately what goes on in Wilde's play, if only because it resembles Wilde's own way of thinking. Moreover, the play clearly owes something to the Restoration comic tradition. "My duty as a gentleman," says Algy, "has never interfered with my pleasures in the smallest degree," thus neatly summing up the principles by which the young bloods of Restoration comedy lived. They were understood to be gentlemen because they were Natural Men, responsive to impulse, capable of falling in love, and so on, in contrast to the inhibited, conventional, rule-obeying, theory-loving tradesmen, Puritans, and pedants, whom they despised. The heroes of Restoration comedy have been criticized too, often with justice, but one thing should be clear by now: their roguishness, their carelessness about money and sexual behavior, was presented not simply to be admired as such. These things had symbolic value as well. The suggestion was that aristocratic young men needed to abandon conventional morality and get back to basic impulse, if the values they represented (moral independence, for example) were not to be annihilated by commercialism and Puritanism. Their roguishness was a proof of freedom, as well as an excuse for scourging the bourgeoisie. Algy's selfishness, and that of the other characters, demands a similar interpretation. It has a satirical force, of course: the manners of the upper classes are being laughed at; but there is more to it than that. In Wilde's vision, a sort of honorable selfishness becomes not merely a virtue, but a moral sine qua non.

Wilde's play, it seems to me, is more successful than most Restoration comedies because it is more pure—more purely absurd, if you like. The process of distorting actuality for expressive purposes is carried out more thoroughly, and the play's moral and aesthetic integrity is better maintained. In the dialogue alone, there is a more consistent heightening, amounting to a transfiguration of everyday conversation. The trouble with many Restoration comedies is that they express values only half-believed in by the audience for which they were intended. The characters praise aristocratic recklessness and sneer at commerce,

yet the original courtly audience was committed to, and dependent on, commerce for at least a large part of its wealth. As a result, because of a secret uncertainty in the playwrights, there is often a confusion between symbolic action and action seriously recommended to the audience for imitation. We are presented with hyperbolic actions and sentiments, which we find not entirely convincing and perhaps a shade hysterical. There is the standard paradox of Restoration comedy, for instance: all moralists are hypocrites; only libertines can see the truth and maintain a fundamental decency. The confusion carried over into real life. Many of the court wits and gallants tried to live out such paradoxes, not always with happy results. Wilde too tried to live out his own paradoxes, with decidedly unhappy results, but in his greatest play artifice and advice do not get mixed up. "I don't quite like women who are interested in philanthropic work," says Cecily. "I think it is so forward of them." This is funnier, and more percipient, than jokes about hypocritical Puritan tradesmen. Wilde's symbol for sensual vitality and obedience to impulse is itself more wisely chosen than that of the Restoration playwrights: instead of using sexual behavior, he uses eating, something much more easily distanced. Contrary to what McCarthy says, The Importance of Being Earnest rarely slips over into recom-mending attitudes that are morally repellent—relative to Restoration comedy, at any rate. You have to stand a long way off from the play to be able to think so. It is difficult to get indignant with the characters.

The farcical structure helps distance what we see, and Wilde exploits it in other ways too. Farce is not necessarily trivial, and even when it is, through its very nature it usually makes assertions and raises questions about human identity; that is what makes the same situations enduringly popular. The hero of farce is usually a cunning rogue who, in order to gratify some impulse, spins an elaborate deception, which his victims seem constantly on the verge of exposing, so that he is constantly threatened with defeat, punishment, or humiliation. We admire the hero because he has the courage to obey his impulses and because his tricks render him protean—free from imposed identity. We despise his victims because they are prisoners of manners, which repress impulse and forbid deception. They seem narrow and timid. A more

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5 The Importance of Being Earnest, ed. Vyvyan Holland (London, 1957), p. 73. Unless otherwise stated, all subsequent references are to this edition of the original four-act version of the play.
highly wrought and expressive sort of farce is that in which all (or most) of the protagonists are rogues, who compete to satisfy their impulses. The moral independence of the most versatile, the most protean, is endorsed by success. *The Importance of Being Earnest* belongs to that sort.

Moreover, Wilde consciously exploits the concern of farce with human identity. The joke in the title is often thought of as a mock-pompous piece of frivolity, but it is more than that. The play might as justly be named "The Importance of Being." The whole thing is comically addressed to the problem of recognizing and defining human identity; we are made to see wide significance in Jack's polite request, "Lady Bracknell, I hate to seem inquisitive, but would you kindly inform me who I am?" (p. 107). The pun on *earnest* and *Ernest* merely makes the title more suitably comic. Neither being earnest nor being Ernest is of much help when confidence is lost in the substantiality of human identity. The concern with identity is repeatedly underlined in the text of the play, where statements that seem superficially only to poke fun at upper-class frivolity continually edge the mind toward a contemplation of the insubstantiality of identity. "It isn't easy to be anything nowadays," complains Algy in the first act. "There's such a lot of beastly competition about." And only a few lines later, Gwendolen feels obliged to deny that she is perfect: "It would leave no room for developments, and I intend to develop in many directions" (Maine, ed., p. 327).

More than most writers of farce, Wilde was conscious of this concern with identity, so natural to the form, and he uses it to express a preoccupation which the nineteenth century gave birth to, and the twentieth century cherishes. Lurking always in the depths of the play is a steady contemplation of Nothingness, of *le néant*, which is all the more effective for its being, in contrast to most of its manifestations, comic in mode. Instead of making Nothingness a pretext for despair, Wilde finds in it a challenge to the imagination. For him, Nothingness in human identity, in human claims to knowledge, in the organization of society, becomes a field to be tilled by the artist—by the artist in each of us.

In many ways a writer owing more to French than to English traditions, in this respect too Wilde shares a quality of vision with Flaubert, Villiers, Zola, Barbey d'Aurevilly, and Mallarmé. They differ from each other, of course, as Wilde differs from them, but in the vision of each, as Robert Martin Adams says, "The shell of personal identity collapses, the yolk of individuality is split. Even grossness is a form of transpar-
ency, even knowledge is a form of complicated and difficult ignorance (Flaubert).” Yet for Wilde this brings liberation, not despair. Though he has Algy complain about what we might call the epistemological complacency of the English, he has him do it gaily: “That is the worst of the English. They are always degrading truths into facts, and when a truth becomes a fact, it loses all its intellectual value” (p. 12).

If The Importance of Being Earnest looks back to the French nineteenth century it also looks forward to the twentieth century and the drama of the absurd. The plot is absurd, in an obvious sense, and many critics have argued that it should be dismissed as a Gilbertian fantasy. It seems to me, however, that it is important, in the negative way that plots are, in the drama of the absurd. Everyone responds to preposterous situations in a way that is crazily systematic, defending his responses with absurdly sententious generalizations. Besides being used as a symbol for sensual vitality, eating becomes a subject for absurd imperatives. Algy, for instance, declares that “One should always eat muffins quite calmly. It is the only way to eat them” (p. 85). People’s behavior and sentiments act as a parody of the real world; such, it is suggested, is the nature of all action, all moralizing. But Wilde carries off this parody better than most of the playwrights whom we now describe as dramatists of the absurd. He is never obvious. His parody always works at two levels, which enrich each other: it pokes fun at the manners of a particular class, and it satirizes the human condition. To my knowledge, only Pinter and Albee do anything at all like this, with comparative success.

Nothingness is repeatedly evoked in the verbal texture of the play in a way that prefigures techniques of the drama of the absurd. Characters are always using words like serious and nonsense in a manner that sends out little ripples of significance. “If you don’t take care,” Jack warns Algy,

> your friend Bunbury will get you into a serious scrape some day.

**Algernon:** I love scrapes. They are the only things that are never serious.

**Jack:** Oh, that’s nonsense, Algy. You never talk anything but nonsense.

**Algernon:** Nobody ever does. (Maine, ed., p. 337)

*Serious* was recognized as a canting expression in the nineteenth cen-

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tury. "No one knows the power," wrote "F. Anstey" in 1885, "that a single serious hairdresser might effect with worldly customers" (OED). Algy's quasi pun works as a protest against the importance attached by the Victorians to the very business of attaching importance (parodied more broadly in Miss Prism); for them, it is often apparent, this was a means of imposing form and stability on a world whose evanescence they half-suspected, a procedure of course unacceptable to Wilde. The joke is parallel to the one about earnest.

The play on the word nonsense expresses a sensibility that is recognizably modern, though it lacks the anguish that is now usually part of it. The sense of futility that arises out of the contemplation of Nothingness is felt only by those whose belief in human dignity requires support from a religious mythology, or a quasi-religious mythology, such as that subscribed to by many humanists. When his mind was at its most creative, Wilde felt no such need, willingly abandoning intellectual comfort and security for intellectual adventurousness in the unknown and unknowable. Algy's perception of universal nonsense is cheerful; it has the gusto of quick intelligence; and because it also works as a gibe at Algy's class, it has a quality of immediate practical shrewdness that makes it the more acceptable.

In the middle of the play, absurd itself is used repeatedly to evoke a sense of immanent Nothingness. Jack cannot understand how he should have a brother in the dining-room: "I don't know what it all means. I think it is perfectly absurd" (p. 48). Algy will not deny that he is Jack's brother: "It would be absurd" (p. 53). Jack says the same about the notion that Algy should lunch twice (p. 57), and he thinks Algy's presence in the garden at Woolton "utterly absurd" (p. 58). Algy disagrees with the contention that he has no right to "Bunbury" at Woolton: "That is absurd. One has a right to Bunbury anywhere one chooses" (p. 83). Gwendolen and Cecily agree that it is "absurd to talk of the equality of the sexes" (p. 91).

These words are used in jokes and casual comments that do not stand out in the text and are likely to be delivered in a carelessly cynical manner, as bits of flimflam designed simply to gain the speaker a tactical advantage in the argument; but they crop up repeatedly and affect the whole flavor of the play.

The use of paradox performs the same function much more obviously. Each paradox is a sort of miniature stylistic enactment of the notion expressed in one of the boldest: "In matters of grave importance style, not sincerity, is the vital thing" (p. 90). This pokes fun at the
beau monde, of course, but it also hints at an answer to the problems raised in the jokes about earnest and serious. Once belief in epistemological certainty is abandoned, style, liberally interpreted, is more important than sincerity. By imposing a consciously provisional order onto evanescent reality, it makes practical decisions possible. Paradox imposes this order in a particularly striking way. It confounds conventional notions about order, identity, and dissimilarity, synthesizing new orders out of the confusion it exposes. Far from concealing chaos and disharmony, it rejoices in them, embraces them courageously, and takes them as a challenge to human wit and ingenuity. Wilde's rapid sequences of paradox after paradox picture for us a world in which men make, undo, and remake reality with almost every sentence they utter.

Of course, not all the paradoxes in The Importance of Being Earnest are purely verbal or confined to one remark. There is a sustained effort in the play to dissolve conventional notions of order in fields where they tend to hypertrophy. Wilde depicts a world in which the socially endorsed certainties are continually evaporating: values respecting social class, education, the Church, money, love, and the family undergo constant metamorphosis. Attitudes toward the family, in particular, are grotesquely transformed. Algy cheerfully dismisses the sentiments associated with kinship: "Relations are simply a tedious pack of tedious people, who haven't got the remotest knowledge of how to live, nor the smallest instinct about when to die" (p. 25). Others invert the normal sentiments. Lady Bracknell speaks of an acquaintance whose husband has died: "I never saw a woman so altered, she looks quite twenty years younger" (p. 13). Gwendolen complains about her lack of influence over her mother: "Few parents nowadays pay any regard to what their children say to them! The old-fashioned respect for the young is rapidly dying out" (pp. 30-31). She approves of her father's domestication, however: "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. 74).

In plot and action, too, conventional notions about family life are broken down. The handbag in Jack's family history excites Lady Bracknell's famous protest: "To be born, or at any rate bred in a handbag, whether it had 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" (p. 23). The comedy is enhanced, of course, by the oddity of Lady Bracknell's own notions (or at least her way of expressing them). She seems to conceive family as something
subject to human volition, and can advise Jack "to make a definite effort
to produce, at any rate, one parent, of either sex, before the season is
quite over" (p. 24). Though we may see parody of upper-class snobbery
here, others do will relations into—and out of—existence, without there
being any feeling of parody. Jack invents a brother; the girls invent
ideal husbands. (Algy's Bunbury is only a friend, but the effect is much
the same.) At the other extreme, the characters accept the family rela-
tionships revealed at the end of the play, with an absurd eagerness that
is just as effective in ridiculing conventional notions. This is particu-
larly evident in Jack's outburst, when he mistakenly assumes Miss
Prism to be his mother. She indignantly reminds him that she is unmar-
rried. "Cannot repentance wipe out an act of folly?" he cries. "Why
should there be one law for men and another for women? Mother! I
forgive you" (p. 107). The family is a category of everyday under-
standing that is one of the first to crumble before the vision of Nothingness.
That is what enables Wilde's characters to adopt such a variety of pos-
tures with respect to it.

Individual identity, too, dissolves before the vision of Nothingness.
That is why farce, and its traditional concern with human identity, was
so useful to Wilde. Each character in The Importance of Being Earnest
is a sort of vacuum that attains to individual identity only through an
effort of the creative imagination. They are like Sartre's famous waiter
in L'Être et le Neant, except that they make their decisions consciously,
and that we are pleased rather than nauseated by the process. Each
attains to identity in the mode of being what he is not. 7

It is a sense of the insubstantiality of human identity which causes
Wilde to place such emphasis on impulse (on selfishness, if you like).
Admit all the problems of epistemology, and impulse still remains.
Obedience to impulse is a defiant way of asserting some sort of basic
identity. Algy's obsession with food is an example. "I hate people who
are not serious about meals," he complains. "It is so shallow of
them" (p. 12). Beneath the parody of manners, we can detect in this a percep-
tion, truthful within the terms of reference the play allows. Algy is pre-
pared to use the word serious here because there is something funda-
mental to relate it to. When appetites are all that is substantial in
human identity, all else must seem shallow. The two girls place a sim-

59-60.
ilar reliance on impulse. Both have faith in first impressions, and both are surprisingly candid about their sexual appetites. Cecily tells Algy, "I don't think you should tell me that you love me wildly, passionately, devotedly, hopelessly. Hopelessly doesn't seem to make much sense, does it?" (Maine, ed., p. 348).

They are quick to change, though. When, after mutual declarations of devotion, Algy tells Cecily he will wait seventeen years for her hand, she replies, "Yes, I felt it instinctively. And I am so sorry for you, Algy. Because I couldn't wait all that time. I hate waiting even five minutes for anybody. It always makes me rather cross. I am not punctual myself, I know, but I do like punctuality in others, and waiting even to be married is quite out of the question" (pp. 100-101). Changeability, in fact, is a corollary of obedience to impulse. As impulses vary, so must the attitudes of the individual. The protagonists of Wilde's play recognize this, particularly the girls. "I never change, except in my affections," Gwendolen announces (p. 110). Their changeability is most amusingly demonstrated in the first meeting of Gwendolen and Cecily, when, in the course of a single scene, they proceed from mutual suspicion to mutual affection, thence to mutual detestation, and finally to mutual affection again, all the time firmly maintaining that they are consistent. The audience is likely to laugh at this sort of thing because it realizes that literary and social conventions are being ridiculed, but there is more to the comedy than that. There is a core of truth in what we are presented with: human beings do change. The joke lies in the way the characters are neither distressed nor surprised at their own changeability. In Wilde's world nothing else is expected.

Love might seem a surprising ingredient in such a world, but it is a play of courtship, and love does have importance in it. Love is based on impulse, after all, and for Wilde it is action, not object; a courageous creative effort of the will, not a substantial inner something; the free play of the imagination, not a faculty. The characters of the play constantly deny the substantiality of love, in speech and action. Their courtships consist in patterns of interlocking fantasy and wit; they woo through imposture and fancy; they pursue and fly; they test and torment each other. Never is there anything static or certain about their relationships. "The very essence of romance is uncertainty," says Algy. "If ever I get married, I'll certainly try to forget the fact" (p. 4). Wilde is following Restoration comedy again, here. "Uncertainty and Expectation are the Joys of Life," says Congreve's Angelica. "Security is an in-
sapid thing, and the overtaking and possessing of a Wish, discovers the Folly of the Chase." And as with Restoration comedy, we admire the lovers for their courage and their wit. We feel that they are absurd too (all action in the play is absurd; the secret is not minding), but at the same time we are made to feel that they are somehow right as well. The theme of sentimental education, normally found in romantic comedy, is parodied by inversion. Fantasies the lovers have about each other are confirmed rather than cured, almost as if wit, the creative imagination (call it what you will), were able magically to force the world into the shapes it suggests to itself. We feel, at any rate, that the lovers earn their partners by growing toward them, through wit.

Because the characters live in a world in which order is constantly vanishing, they scorn theory, consistency, and the appearance of simplicity. "The truth," as Algy says, "is rarely pure and never simple" (p. 9). Certainly, in matters of identity, seeming intelligibility is to be distrusted. "The simplicity of your nature," Gwendolen tells Jack, "makes you exquisitely incomprehensible to me" (p. 31). The characters are alert, not to a harmonious universal nature, but to a proliferation of separate, deceptive, and contradictory sense-impressions. Knowledge comes only through the imagination. Gwendolen laughs at Jack's misgivings over her delight in his being called (as she thinks) Ernest. He cautiously inquires how she might feel were his name not Ernest, but she will not listen. "Ah, that is clearly a metaphysical speculation," she says, "and like all metaphysical speculation, has very little reference at all to the actual facts of real life, as we know them" (p. 17). This is an ironic node. The observation by itself fits in with the general theme of the play, but in the immediate context the joke is against Gwendolen (and Jack, when we think how he must feel). He has only assumed the name of Ernest; her notions are just as "metaphysical"; and what seem to be the actual facts of real life thoroughly justify such a speculation. Yet at the end of the play, Gwendolen's faith in the name, her conviction that she will marry an Ernest, and her insistence that her lover conform to her ideal are all justified; we learn that Jack's true name is Ernest. One effect of all this is to satirize faith in ideals by having it vindicated absurdly, but there is more to it than that. We feel delighted at the outcome, not like the recipients of a warning. We are made to feel that confident fantasies justify themselves, that a bold imagination is more useful than plodding attention to apparent facts.

In Wilde’s world truth itself dwindles into insignificance. The characters have a strictly practical attitude to the relationship between statements and actuality, the latter being so elusive. Charged with being named John, Jack declares, “I could deny it if I liked. I could deny anything if I liked” (p. 81). And he is embarrassed when required to utter things in strict correspondence with what seem to be facts: “it is very painful for me to be forced to speak the truth. It is the first time in my life that I have ever been reduced to such a painful position, and I am really quite inexperienced in doing anything of the kind, so you must excuse me if I stammer in my tale” (pp. 81-82). He goes on to say that he has never had a brother, which turns out to be untrue; Algy is his brother. Once again the inference is that truth cannot be discovered through the senses and the intellect alone. Jack’s witty lies are more percipient. The comic inversion of truth and untruth is maintained in Jack’s dismay, when he learns that what he had thought to be lies are true. “Gwendolen,” he says, “it is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth. Can you forgive me?” She can. “There is always hope,” she says, “even for those who are most accurate in their statements” (p. 114). Even when it is the art of living, we are tempted to gloss, “Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art.”

Jack and Algy certainly attain their ends through lying. They are true rogues, impulsive, lovers of deception and imposture. They fulfill themselves in the way of all rogues: by discovering human freedom in protean identity. Doubtless what they do permits us to laugh at the mad antics young gentlemen get up to, even to disapprove mildly, but the candid spectator will admit that their tricks inspire above all else a feeling of moral liberation. Jack’s double life may be exposed, Algy’s Bunbury may be deprived of his existence, but these deceptions serve their purpose, and part of us at least is glad.

Gwendolen and Cecily rely on beautiful untrue things as much as their suitors do, but instead of deceiving the world through imposture, they demand that the world accept the pleasing fantasies they choose to project onto it. The heroes adopt identities to suit the occasion; the heroines imagine identities to suit the persons with whom they choose to associate. Gwendolen explains her principles in love: “We live, as I hope you know, Mr Worthing, in an age of ideals. The fact is constantly mentioned in the more expensive monthly magazines, and has reached

the provincial pulpits, I am told. And my ideal has always been to love someone of the name of Ernest. There is something in that name that inspires absolute confidence" (p. 16). She is very firm about this, and Cecily, whose words on the subject are almost identical (p. 70), is nearly as firm. The comic parallel generates a certain irony against the girls; we are tempted to laugh at them for sharing a folly, yet we cannot help admiring the strength of their resolution, absurd though it is. Though idealism is burlesqued, we are made to admire the wit and courage required to impose a pattern on the world, even such a one as this.

The women in the play are generally stronger and more resourceful than the men. The latter are forced to prevaricate in a way that at times seems shuffling, even abject, whereas the former are always perfectly poised and move with imperturbable grace from one contradictory posture to another. I suspect that this has something to do with Wilde's own personality and personal history, but the pattern makes sense on its own terms. The play may be seen as a disquisition in favor of a set of attitudes more normally associated with women than with men. It commends the sort of character that accepts experience, with all its confusions, and accommodates itself through provisional opportunistic adjustments—through style, in short. It pokes fun at hard and fast ideas about reality, at that aggressive kind of intelligence which seeks to control reality through theory. Rightly or wrongly, women are thought of as conforming more often to the subtle stereotype; men are thought of as conforming more often to the aggressive stereotype. Wilde was not simplistic about this. The embodiment of aggressive masculine intelligence in the play is Miss Prism, but that is part of the joke against her. The other women are naturally more at home in Wilde's world than the men.

Lady Bracknell, of course, is the character that most thoroughly exemplifies feminine strength. Delightful though she is, she is likely at first to baffle the audience's expectations because she is cast in the role of obstructionist to the lovers; in a conventional romantic comedy she would have to be defeated and humiliated. Yet that is not what happens to her, and it is difficult even to imagine it happening. The critics have recognized that she rises above this role; she has even been called a goddess. Satisfaction is what Lady Bracknell requires, not defeat, because, irrespective of her role, she is the character that embodies most forcibly Wilde's notions about the creative power of the imagination. Out of the nebulous material of society fashion, she wills into being a world of rock-hard solidity, obedient to her dispensation, before which all other worlds, real and imagined, fade into ghostly insubstantiality.
The audience may laugh at the burlesque of a fashionable hostess, but there is reverence in the laughter. Her directives on the acceptable and the proper are not empirical observations on the state of fashion; they are the utterances of a lawgiver, endowed with all but divine afflatus. Her response to Jack's Belgrave Square address is typical:

**Lady Bracknell:** The unfashionable side. However, that could easily be altered.

**Jack:** Do you mean the fashion or the side, Lady Bracknell?

**Lady Bracknell:** Both if necessary, I presume. (p. 22)

In contrast to the characters of farce who are imprisoned by manners, Lady Bracknell makes manners, and all the trivia of fashion, the building material of a world in which her will is law. She obtains freedom through manners, and she is powerful because she can impose her world on others.

Miss Prism and Dr. Chasuble are funny because they fail to impose their worlds on others, and in failing weakly parody the central characters. Their trouble is that they do not realize what they are doing and think that their rules and theories represent a real, substantial, unchanging world. Dr. Chasuble calls Miss Prism Egeria (an appellation much better suited to Lady Bracknell), but though she enunciates laws and definitions, they are tamely borrowed, not her own. Her paradoxes are amusing, not because they represent an attempt through wit to impose order on confusion, contradiction, and human folly, but because they indicate an unawareness of these things. Indeed, she does not realize that they are paradoxes. The audience laughs at her, not with her, when she describes her novel thus: "The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means" (p. 35). Clearly she is a fit partner for Dr. Chasuble, who is thoroughly insensitive to the present moment (he is always misinterpreting the situation) and given to forcing an all-purpose moral onto any situation. His famous sermon is an example: "My sermon on the meaning of the manna in the wilderness can be adapted to almost any occasion, joyful, or, as in the present case, distressing. I have preached it at harvest celebrations, christenings, confirmations, on days of humiliation and festal days" (pp. 44-45). Both Miss Prism's novel and Dr. Chasuble's sermon, it is clear, recommend an ordered picture of the world, which excludes the sense of absurdity behind order, central to Wilde's vision, a sense that *The Importance of Being Earnest*, in its entirety, practically demonstrates.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to fit the suggested interpretation
of the play into the general scheme of Wilde's ideas, but it is not difficult to see how it may be reconciled with Wilde's views on art, individuality, morality, crime, politics, and so on. What I have tried to do is to provide an interpretation fitting in with notions concerning farce, the drama of the absurd, and existentialist theories of identity, all of which have been fashionable in recent years. This can certainly help us like and understand the play, but I do not wish it to be thought that I am suggesting it be admired because it is "relevant" (whatever that word might mean nowadays). It seems to me that it should be admired, not simply because it expresses a characteristically modern sensibility, nor even because it does so before its time, prophetically, but because it does so supremely well. It is possible to dislike the play, on grounds similar to those set out by Mary McCarthy, if only because it is possible to dislike the sort of sensibility it expresses. Its vehicle, the literary tradition to which I suggest the play belongs, is one that readily allows the writer to sink into self-indulgence. Some feel it permits little else nowadays. But I think that if we are prepared to accept the sensibility and the tradition as capable of producing excellence (if, in other words, we are prepared to adopt appropriate standards in judging the play), we are compelled to recognize the excellence of Wilde's play. To the contemplation of Nothingness, of the absurd, Wilde brings qualities of wit, intelligence, and (not least) appetite for life, rarely found so abundantly in such a context. The Importance of Being Earnest is a great farce because it transcends the normal limitations of the form. Wilde used the form to make a play that is sparkling, but profound as well.

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