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The Importance of Being Shorter: The Staging of Oscar Wilde's Most Famous Comedy

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Oscar Wilde wrote the first draft of *The Importance of Being Earnest* during August and September 1894, while he was on holiday with his family in the town of Worthing (hence the surname of its protagonist, Jack/Ernest Worthing)¹. Wilde was under economic pressure at the time, as his letters show. In July 1894 he had begun to tempt George Alexander, the actor-manager of the St James's Theatre, with the promise of a play, «an amusing thing» with a «slight plot» and «lots of fun and wit», which he would soon write in exchange for an advance of money. Receiving no answer and thinking that Alexander might consider the work too farcical, Wilde sent him a preliminary scheme for another play, a «modern comedy-drama» which would certainly be more suitable to the public and the repertoire of the St James's². As Alan Bird suggests, it is likely that the «amusing thing» was *The Importance of Being Earnest*, while the more serious play was the never written *Mr and Mrs Daventry*³. Despite Alexander's cool reception, once *The Importance of Being Earnest* was completed Wilde submitted the first copy to him at the end of October, after having sent the manuscript for typing to Mrs Marshall's typewriting agency. Its provisional cover title was *Lady Lancing*⁴.

George Alexander had gone into management in 1889. Two years later he took the St James's Theatre, building up its reputation for stylish and accomplished productions of well-written plays. He ran the St James's until his death in 1915 and be-

1. In act I, Jack explains to Lady Bracknell that he is a foundling. He was adopted by Mr Thomas Cardew, who found him at Victoria Station, London. Mr Cardew had a first-class ticket for Worthing in his pocket, so he later decided to give Jack this surname. Worthing is a seaside resort in Sussex.

2. See A. Bird, *The Plays of Oscar Wilde*, Vision, London 1977, pp. 160-3. Bird refers to R. Hart-Davis (ed.), *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*, London 1962.

3. See *Introduction*, in O. Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, edited by R. Jackson, E. Benn, London 1980, p. xxvi: «The new serious play was never written by Wilde, although Frank Harris later worked up a drama, *Mr and Mrs Daventry*, along the lines indicated in the proposals».

4. Bird, *The Plays of Oscar Wilde*, cit., p. 163.

came well-known for his skilful and subtle acting as well as his meticulous stage directions, as Russell Jackson reports:

His biographer, the playwright and novelist A. E. Mason, described Alexander's work on one of his own plays. The manager went through the script line by line and move by move, interrogating him rigorously on every sentence, and planning moves with a toy theatre stage. Then a ground cloth was marked with the lines of walls and exits and for three weeks there were daily rehearsals, beginning each day punctually at eleven and finishing at two, until for the last four days there were morning and afternoon sessions, culminating in two dress-rehearsals. The management's attention to detail in staging and performance was thorough⁵.

First nights at the St James's were like «brilliant parties», pervaded with the atmosphere of fashionable occasions. But they were never so exclusive as to be without the gallery audience, who kept their privilege of expressing immediate and vocal judgement on what was put on the stage, as was the case for the disastrous première of Henry James's *Guy Domville* on 5 January 1895.

Alexander had already produced Wilde's first Society comedy⁶, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, in 1892. The relations between the actor-manager and the playwright had been unhappy due in particular to the many changes to the text suggested by Alexander during rehearsals⁷. It is no accident that Wilde had both his next two Society comedies produced at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket, by two other managers: Herbert Beerbohm (*A Woman of No Importance*, premiered on 19 April 1893) and Lewis Waller (*An Ideal Husband*, premiered on 3 January 1895). But Wilde's ever-present financial difficulties were probably the reason behind his attempt to place another play with Alexander.

After his initial hesitation, two facts convinced Alexander to put *The Importance of Being Earnest* on stage: on 3 January 1895 Wilde's *An Ideal Husband* had begun a triumphant run at the Haymarket Theatre and two days later Henry James's *Guy Domville* had proved an instant failure at the St James's. Alexander, who had found a taker for Wilde's farcical comedy in actor-manager Charles Wyndham, succeeded in having the play back. The comedy was released by Wyndham on the condition that he had the option on Wilde's next play. Alexander agreed on the condition that the subject of this reservation should not be *Mr and Mrs Daventry*.

The Importance of Being Earnest: A Trivial Comedy for Serious People or, as Wilde described it, a play written by a butterfly for butterflies⁸, opened on the

5. R. Jackson, "The Importance of Being Earnest", in P. Raby (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1997, pp. 161-2.

6. Society drama was a theatrical genre in vogue in the late 19th century. In this context "Society", with a capital "s", refers to the values and fashions of the ruling élite, as distinct from the community ("society") at large.

7. Bird, *The Plays of Oscar Wilde*, cit., p. 94.

8. Ivi, p. 164.

night of 14 February 1895. London was enduring a long spell of cold weather and several theatres advertised their steam-heating among the attractions of their programme. The first night of Wilde's comedy had already been put off from 12 February because several of the women in the cast had bad colds⁹. With Alexander as John Worthing, Allan Aynesworth as Algernon Moncrieff, Irene Vanbrugh as Gwendolen Fairfax, and Rose Leclercq as Lady Bracknell, it was a resounding triumph from the very beginning to the end. Years later Allan Aynesworth told Wilde's biographer Hesketh Pearson:

In my fifty-three years of acting, I never remember a greater triumph than the first night of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The audience rose in their seats and cheered and cheered again. In general the critics were equally enthusiastic and the whole of London, social, literary, frivolous and serious, agreed that there was not a more amusing evening to be spent anywhere than at the St James's Theatre¹⁰.

Wilde now had two plays running successfully at different theatres, money pouring in and a brilliant future as a playwright. Nobody could imagine that his career would collapse a few months later in the witness box of the Queensberry libel trial.

As originally drafted by Wilde in August-September 1894, the play was in four acts. Exercise books containing a fair copy in Wilde's autograph have survived and are divided between the Arents Tobacco Collection at New York Public Library (Acts I and II) and the British Library (Acts III and IV)¹¹. But the comedy premiered on 14 February 1895, and later published in 1899, was reduced to three acts. Of the four stages of revision between the manuscript and the reduction, the typescripts now in the Arents and Frohman Collections are the only evidence editors can rely on¹². The text submitted for licensing to the Lord Chamberlain's office in January 1895, under the title of *Lady Lancing*, was the first official three-act version of the play. Lady Bracknell was called Lady Lancing on the cover, but Lady Brancaster inside. Algernon's surname was Montford, not Moncrieff¹³. Interestingly, the subtitle was *A Serious Comedy for Trivial People* instead of the one later used for publication: *A Trivial Comedy for Serious People*. The play was subject to more changes in the course of rehearsal, as shown by the typescript owned by Alexander (today

9. Jackson, "The Importance of Being Earnest", in Raby (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, cit., p. 161.

10. H. Pearson, *The Life of Oscar Wilde*, London 1946, p. 257. Quoted from Bird, *The Plays of Oscar Wilde*, cit., p. 164.

11. The manuscript drafts of the four acts have been transcribed in volume I of S. A. Dickson (ed.), *The Importance of Being Earnest... In Four Acts as Originally Written by Oscar Wilde*, New York Public Library: publication number 6 of the Arents Tobacco Collection, 2 vols., New York 1956.

12. Acts I (dated November 1894), II and IV (dated September 1894), with Wilde's manuscript notes and alterations, are in the Arents Collection, New York Public Library. A four-act typescript from 31 October 1894 is in the Frohman Collection, New York Public Library.

13. Bird, *The Plays of Oscar Wilde*, cit., p. 170.

at the Harvard Theatre Collection) and marked by him with numerous alterations, additions and detailed stage directions, which show evidence of his careful production methods. Although this is not the prompt-book of the first production – there are none of the calls and cues that the stage director would have needed – it is certainly the best available evidence of the performed text and its interpretation.

The Importance of Being Earnest was finally published in 1899, after Wilde had been released from prison, and limited to one thousand copies. Publisher Leonard Smithers sent him a typed copy of the text owned by George Alexander, which Wilde marked with further alterations and corrections, and served as copy for the printers. In particular, Wilde removed most of the italicizations and detailed stage directions. The omission of the latter was a common feature of plays published in the late nineteenth century by authors wishing to avoid the clutter of technical directions, customary in some acting editions. This is generally accepted now as the standard version¹⁴.

The shorter version of the play was requested by Alexander. In those days, before the ascendancy of the independent director, the ultimate authority lay with the manager¹⁵. Alexander insisted that the play should be reduced to three acts preceded, as usual, by a short curtain-raiser. Acts II and III were therefore conflated to make the present Act II and the third act of the three-act version was altered to make it consistent with the changes earlier in the play. About 20% of the dialogue was removed together with some minor characters. Wilde revised every sequence, most speeches and almost every sentence, which hardly indicates that flippant attitude to play-writing he wanted to promote about himself. As noted by Jackson,

This fine tuning is part of a process that Wilde was careful to conceal beneath the image of an artist who worked by inspiration and *sprezzatura*, composing almost in spite of himself. He was a master of what would now be called media opportunities¹⁶.

The best-known and most radical alteration made between the first draft and the first night was the omission of a long scene in Act II showing Algernon at the Manor House being served with a writ for 762 pounds 14 shillings and 2 pence on behalf of the Savoy Hotel, by a solicitor named Gribsby¹⁷. Obviously, it was Jack who had purposely run into debt playing the part of his wicked brother Ernest in the city, but Algernon could not object to the solicitor because of his newly assumed identity as Ernest in the countryside.

This scene was also part of a large sequence of references in the manuscript

14. For a detailed history of the text and its sources see *Note on the Text*, in Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, cit., pp. XLII-XLV.

15. *Introduction*, ivi, p. XIX.

16. Jackson, "*The Importance of Being Earnest*", cit., p. 164.

17. This sequence, corresponding to ff. 49-67 of the manuscript draft, begins with Merrimen's second speech in Act II of the standard version, precisely, at lines 360-1 (p. 57) of the Benn Edition. Further quotations from the text are from the edition: Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, cit.

draft to Algernon's financial difficulties, which seem to be alluded to and mocked by the paradoxical situation he has to face as Ernest. In fact, in the draft Algernon's debts are far more pressing than in later versions. In the opening scene of Act I he is besieged by creditors – a wine-merchant and a tailor – so much so that he exclaims: «Wish to goodness some ass would leave me a large fortune. Can't go on as I am going on now. It is ridiculous»¹⁸. It is likely that Wilde first thought of making the need for a fortune into a motivation for Algernon's pursuit of Jack's young ward. The topic of Algernon's debts is reinforced by Lady Brancaster's comment, shortly after her entrance in Act I: «Of course I never mention anything about them [your debts] to your uncle. Indeed, as you know, I never mention anything to him at all»¹⁹. This and many other references to Algernon's debts were removed at an early stage in revision. In the three-act version, the only reference to Algernon's debts is at the beginning of Act II when the butler Lane presents several letters on a salver which are supposed to be bills and he tears them up (p. 45). And the mercenary attitude of Algernon highlighted in the draft is later moved onto Lady Bracknell, whose view of Cecily's eligibility is definitely affected by her fortune.

Beside Mr Gribbsby in the above-mentioned scene, another minor character who disappears is Moulton the gardener. At the beginning of Act II in the draft, Cecily asks him if he would like to take the German lesson in her place but he declines («I don't hold with them furrin tongues miss») and disappears behind the hedge. Three further lines appear in the draft only. In the standard version he is just referred to by Mrs Prism at the very beginning of Act II. Apart from Alexander's insistence on the reduction of the acts from four to three, these changes may also account for Wilde's will to avoid stock characterisation and remove slang or vogue-words from the play in order to limit cliché and farcical exaggeration, as suggested by Jackson²⁰. Algernon's debts would recall the usual life-style of the man-about-town character. Moulton would appear as the threadbare comic rustic of traditional English drama and his language would clash with the refined linguistic universe of a "pure verbal opera", in W. H. Auden's words²¹, in which all characters express themselves in well-formed complete sentences like their creator. If a minor character like the butler Lane has survived the cuts, it is because he escapes the stock type of the traditional scheming servant in his being unconventional, refined, witty and paradoxical – that is, "Wildean".

Alexander's pressure for a shorter play resulted in an increased dramatic unity and a quicker pace. Here are some examples of how the dialogue was made more effective by Wilde's cuts and revisions to conform to Alexander's request.

In Act I, soon after Lady Bracknell's exit, Jack unburdens himself to Algernon about the disappointing result of his formal proposal to Lady Bracknell and harshly criticises her. Here is Algernon's reply to Jack in the standard version:

18. Jackson, *"The Importance of Being Earnest"*, cit., note 11, p. 176.

19. Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, cit., note 295, p. 18.

20. *Introduction*, ivi, p. XXIX.

21. Jackson, *"The Importance of Being Earnest"*, cit., p. 171.

ALGERNON. My dear boy. I love hearing my relations abused. It is the only thing that makes me put up with them at all. Relations are simply a tedious pack of people, who haven't got the remotest knowledge of how to live, and the smallest instinct about when to die (lines 611-5, p. 33).

In the manuscript draft Algernon's answer is much longer. He adds a few particulars of his family (Mary Farquhar, Gladys, and Lord Brancaster – uncle Geoffrey – who «isn't half a bad sort in his silly way, considering what a thoroughly typical woman Aunt Augusta is»). He also offers another definition of Relations, which seems less efficacious than the one in the standard version: «Relations never lend one money, and won't give one credit, even for genius. They are a sort of aggravated form of the public»²².

In Act II Chasuble explains what baptism by immersion is. The first quotation below is the current standard version – essential, concise and definitely better organised than the longer version in the manuscript, reported in the second quotation:

CHASUBLE. You need have no apprehensions. Sprinkling is all that is necessary, or indeed I think advisable. Our weather is so changeable. At what hour would you wish the ceremony performed? (line 285, p. 54)

CHASUBLE. Oh no. You need have no apprehension. That form of ritual, strangely enough, is now confirmed to certain religious bodies not in direct communion with us. Sprinkling is all that is necessary, or indeed, I think advisable. Our weather is so changeable there is great mortality amongst the Baptists. At what hour would you wish the ceremony performed?

The following passage in italics uttered by Lady Brancaster in Act III, when Jack is questioning Miss Prism about the handbag, shows Wilde's immense inventiveness, which however had to be sacrificed for the economy of the text. It appears only in the draft and licensing office and was struck out later. The cut of Lady Brancaster's hilarious comment speeds up the rhythm of the scene:

MISS PRISM. [...] In a moment of mental abstraction, for which I never can forgive myself, I deposited the manuscript in the bassinette, and placed the baby in the hand-bag.

JACK. But where did you deposit the handbag?

LADY BRANCASTER. *I do not see how that can matter now. It was, I suppose, left at the offices of one of those publishers who do not return rejected contributions unless accompanied by stamps. With your usual carelessness, Prism, I suppose you never dreamed of putting stamps with the baby. That unfortunate child is probably at the present moment lying in the waste-paper basket of some large commercial house.*

MISS PRISM. Do not ask me, Mr Worthing. (lines 359-64, pp. 98-9)

22. See Appendix IV, in Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, cit., p. 119.

On top of Wilde's revisions, Alexander made alterations further improving the brilliant pace of the comedy and showing his meticulous staging. Some of them were later dropped by Wilde in his correction of the page-proofs for the Smithers edition. Alexander changed Jack's age from twenty-five (as in the draft) to thirty-five, since he himself was thirty-six when the play was first performed. In the draft, before the famous dialogue between Jack and Lady Brancaster on Jack's credentials in Act I, Jack pulls out a cigarette case from his pocket, opens it and takes a cigarette but Lady Brancaster's sharp glance makes him give up. This stage direction was never adopted in further versions, on the ground that it would be unmannerly for a man to smoke in the presence of a lady. At the end of Act I Alexander makes Algernon write Jack's countryside address on an envelope rather than on his shirt cuff. He also cuts some parts in order to make verbal exchanges more slender. For example, in the following speech by Gwendolen in Act III he omits all but the fourth sentence («Their explanations appear to be quite satisfactory»):

GWENDOLEN. I have the gravest doubts upon the subject. But I intend to crush them. This is not the moment for German scepticism. (*Moving to CECILY*). Their explanations appear to be quite satisfactory, especially Mr Worthing's. That seems to me to have the stamp of truth upon it. (lines 34-8, p. 84)

The scene that probably most shows Alexander's precision is Jack's entrance in mourning clothes in Act II. While in the draft and the licensing copy the entrance is much simpler, Alexander's detailed stage directions make sure that the audience catches sight of Jack before he is seen by Miss Prism and Dr Chasuble, to reach the maximum of hilarity:

*Enter JACK slowly from the back of the garden R [right]. He goes C. [centre]. He is dressed entirely in black. DR CHASUBLE and MISS PRISM both turn, come down-stage, then toward C., see JACK for the first time*²³.

In the standard version it is much simpler:

Enter JACK slowly from the back of the garden. He is dressed in the deepest mourning, with crape hat-band and black gloves (p. 50).

Wilde, too, continued polishing the text, adding adornments during rehearsals and, later, the correction of the proof sheets for the Smithers' edition of 1899. As Jackson points out, some of the changes might seem trivial in themselves but had a serious consequence in a play so economical in its language and effects²⁴. Seemingly searching for the perfect witty joke, Wilde considered several variations of the title of Dr Chasuble's sermon (Act II, line 249, p. 52), which was given for ben-

23. See Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, cit., p. 50, note 208.

24. Jackson, "The Importance of Being Earnest", cit., p. 163.

enefit of a charity described at one time or another as the «Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children» (a real organisation, and therefore not really suitable), the «Society for the Discontent among the Higher Orders» and, in the page proofs of the 1899 edition, the «Society for the Discontent among the Lower Orders». He finally altered this to «Discontent among the Upper Orders». Another joke later improved was Algernon's remark on modern culture in Act I. In the draft the joke was not as neat as in the 1899 edition:

MS draft

ALGERNON. One should read everything. That is the true basis of modern culture. More than half of modern culture depends on the unreadable²⁵.

Standard version

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 (lines 130-2, p. 11).

The setting of the acts underwent a change too. In the manuscript draft, Acts II, III and IV were all in the garden of the Manor House. In the three-act text submitted to the Lord Chamberlain's office Acts II and III were still in the garden. Only in later versions was the action of Act III moved indoors, to the morning-room overlooking the garden. Wilde's settings seem to be a clever variation of the old equivalence corruption/city and innocence/countryside, particularly evident at the beginning of Act II, where Cecily is studying among the roses. As in Shakespeare's comedies, the characters undergo an evolutionary process while they are in the countryside, but the final resolution of the problems – the characters' symbolic turning their backs on their old life and facing their new, married life in a state of earnestness – and the happy ending are moved within the walls of the elegant Manor House, more suitable to these upper class people. Setting the third act indoors also balances the alternation in-out-in of the three acts and provides the closing of a circle.

Vyvyan Holland, Wilde's son, tried to reconstruct the four-act version in 1957, but the result was not convincing from a theatrical point of view. As Bird points out, «although we lose a short act there is clear gain in dramatic unity; and today even more than in Wilde's time audiences do not care to sit through any play that is longer than three short acts»²⁶. Bird also underlines a clumsiness in the balance of events in the first act and those of the next two, «which the four-act version would have further emphasised»²⁷.

After Wilde's arrest on 5 April 1895 the play ran until 8 May, his name having

25. See Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, cit., p. 11, notes 130-5.

26. Bird, *The Plays of Oscar Wilde*, cit., p. 171.

27. Ivi, p. 172.

been removed from the playbills and programmes. The play ran for a total of eighty-six performances but Alexander lost the sum of two hundred and eighty-nine pounds, eight shillings and four pence²⁸. While Wilde was serving his sentence, he was declared bankrupt and all his effects were auctioned, including drafts and manuscripts of published and unpublished works. Alexander was able to buy the copyright of *The Importance of Being Earnest* for a small sum. In 1902 he revived the play at the St James's Theatre and, although it was well received by critics and public, it still did not make money. In 1909, on the second revival, it ran for eleven months and made a profit of over twenty-one thousand pounds, a very large sum of money at the time. On his death he bequeathed the copyright to Wilde's son Vyvyan, who was considerably enriched by it.

The Importance of Being Earnest marked the apex of Wilde's popularity, fame and career as a playwright. Its apparently flimsy structure has resisted the test of time, since it is still one of the most performed plays in English drama at present. The formula of its lasting success is the result of the collaboration between an extraordinary verbal genius and a theatrical star: Oscar Wilde and George Alexander.

28. Ivi, p. 166.