

Allen 1

Archived thesis/research paper/faculty publication from the University of North Carolina at Asheville's NC DOCKS Institutional Repository: <http://libres.uncg.edu/ir/unca/>

Abandoning Pretense: Oscar Wilde's Engagement with Society

Senior Paper

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For a Degree Bachelor of Arts with
A Major in Literature at
The University of North Carolina at Asheville
Spring 2016

By *Charles Tyler Allen*

Evan Gurney

Thesis Director
Evan Gurney

David Hopes

Thesis Advisor
David Hopes

Upon the 1895 publication of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Oscar Wilde had reached the climax of his literary career. Notwithstanding his subsequent arrest and fall from grace that same year, Wilde remains a celebrated literary figure in not only the public conscience, but also within the realm of academia, where his work continues to amuse and inspire readers and scholars alike. In what has been described by numerous publication and theater companies as Wilde's "most brilliant *tour de force*," *Earnest* is the culmination of a decade's worth of examining and exploring the cultural nuances of living among the aristocratic elite in Victorian society. From the orchestration of marriage proposals and the rules of courtship, to the careful structuring of an economically-beneficial family unit, Wilde developed his own spin on the contemporary practice of undermining Victorian conventions to the point of absurdity through hyperbole, epigrammatical assertions, and rhetorical inversion. But only in *Earnest* does the amalgamation of Wilde's observations seem to come together in a way that surpasses the success shared by his other plays, namely *A Woman of No Importance* and *An Ideal Husband*, which collectively established Wilde as prominent figure of the English stage.

It is tempting to label *Earnest* as an intellectual representation of revolutionary and aesthetic philosophies that permeated throughout *fin de siècle* Europe at the time of its publication. But the assertion that *Earnest* is a revolutionary text is suppressed by the play's apparent contradiction, as it fails to acknowledge the narrative's eventual reinforcement of Victorian social values at its conclusion, despite the play's insistence that those conventions are trivial, and therefore obsolete. The seemingly contradictory stance on Victorian ideals that the text delivers towards the end of the play is a subject of much discussion among Wilde scholars, including his own grandson, Merlin Holland, who remarks upon his grandfather's enigmatic legacy in his essay "Biography and the art of lying." Holland argues that attempting to analyze

the work of Oscar Wilde is oftentimes a frustrating endeavor, because for every piece of literary criticism concerning Wilde's bibliography, there is an equivalent body of work disputing the former. Holland takes note of this phenomenon in the article when he says that "[Wilde's] is simply not a life which can tolerate an either/or approach with logical conclusions, but demands the flexibility of a both/and treatment." Keeping in mind the irony of the play's glaring contradiction, this paper will seek to explain why Wilde might have chosen to write a comedy about the triviality of Victorian society only to reinforce its values by the play's conclusion. In order to familiarize the reader with Victorian social conventions, I will first discuss the relevant social conventions within the text as well as their subsequent reception by the characters, namely Algernon and Lady Bracknell. Once I have established the cultural context in which *Earnest* was written, I will emphasize the conditional leniency that high society granted to the violators of its principles, insofar as the characters in the play are allowed to transgress social norms in private as long as they adhere to established social and legal boundaries in public. By examining the fictional relationships between Wilde's characters and their society, I will seek to explain Wilde's insistence on abandoning social conventions only to reinforce them at the play's conclusion.

In order to better understand the vast repertoire of social conventions that exist within *Earnest*, and subsequently how those conventions are inverted, one must first seek to understand the culture. As per the playwright's stage directions, *Earnest* takes place in "present-day London," which for Wilde would have corresponded to the year 1895. Queen Victoria would reign for another six years, and in a sense Victorianism was still the predominant mode of English morality, but as Dr. Ruth Livesey notes in her paper "Fin de Siècle," the English adoption of French symbolism and other forms of aesthetic thought during Wilde's time (Wilde

himself was influenced by Baudelaire among others) issued “a challenge to the traditional and formal conventions of high Victorian ideals for art and literature” in a manner that signalled a radical social and philosophical departure from the Victorian worldview (Livesey). Oscar Wilde, in drawing upon literary influences such as Algernon Swinburne and Walter Pater, had developed his own brand of aestheticism based upon individualism, a steadfast devotion to beauty, and the role of the artist. Nevertheless, the *fin de siècle* period in England proved to be much more than a battle of ideas, as the radical philosophies from the continent threatened to dismantle the yoke of Victorianism entirely. Many authors and playwrights of the era, including Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, and W. S. Gilbert, among others, would direct their creative efforts to undermining the esteemed values of the Victorian elite. These conventions, based upon a conservative understanding of Christian morality - and also a reaction to the English Romantic movement - were tied into various social mechanisms in everyday life, and as such constituted what the dominant society (henceforth referred to as “high society” to indicate class) perceived to be the established social norms. Within the context of the play, *Earnest* is a social commentary on the triviality of a few of these conventions, namely marriage, the private and public spheres, family, and the moral imperative.

In the play, marriage is perhaps best described by the matronly Lady Bracknell when she says that “an engagement should come on a young girl as a surprise, pleasant or unpleasant, as the case may be. It is hardly a matter that she should be allowed to arrange one for herself” (*Earnest* 12). During the Victorian period, the institution of marriage would hardly have been recognizable by today’s western standards; indeed, even during Wilde’s generation the notion that a woman was allowed to choose whom she could marry was considered unthinkable to the middle and upper classes. At the time, marriage was by and large a mutually-beneficial

agreement between two families of affluence in order to consolidate social and economic resources (Reed 106). In general, marriage constituted one of the only means of advancing the social ladder, especially within the rigidity of England's stratified class system. Unlike today, divorce wasn't really an option for most couples, and so the union was mostly based out of tolerance for one another rather than any semblance of romantic interest. If marriage was considered a stressful ordeal for a man, it was a form of tempered servitude for most women. In his book *Victorian Conventions*, John R. Reed asserts that "a major dilemma facing young women, instructed that love and marriage were her purposes in life, was the attempt to combine the two" (Reed 106). Reed posits that Victorian girls had been encouraged by plays and novels to behave "like coquettes and dream of love," which only served to embolden their opposition when confronted with arranged marriage.

The protest against forced, loveless, and commercial marriages had been a prevalent theme in feminist literature since the beginning of the nineteenth century, but the acquisition of social platforms such as women's magazines - Wilde himself edited *The Woman's World* for a number of years - transformed the issue into a visceral social dilemma. Reed quotes from an 1897 article in *The Lady's Realm*, written by Marie Corelli, that compares arranged marriages to chattel slavery: "[Corelli] declared that the London market opened in May, and that the 'season' when girls were brought out was as barbaric as the slave-market of Stamboul" (Reed 113). Lady Bracknell issues a similar reproach to marriage when she comments on the untimely death of a dear friend's husband, one Lady Harbury, whose hair had "turned quite gold with grief" and seemed to be living "entirely for pleasure now," which suggests that divorce or even death returns a woman back to her natural, jovial state (*Earnest* 8). Another possible interpretation would render the wife a slave in the servant-master dichotomy, who only became "freed" upon

the death of her husband, as was the case with many slaves on American plantations. Wilde's inversion of the popular idiom is humorous, but Lady Bracknell's commentary seems to carry some emotional baggage, especially when considering her own marriage to Lord Bracknell. However, Lady Bracknell's reproach to marriage and other institutions is purely hypothetical; the caveat to her critique of social conventions comes with the understanding that although she might not agree with them, she must still serve the system as its veritable enforcer, because it is the system that allows Lady Bracknell to thrive as a wealthy aristocrat in an otherwise impoverished and industrial society. A consistent theme throughout the comedy is her nephew Algernon's insistence on trivializing social institutions, like marriage, only to have his aunt come along to reinforce the recognized social norm. Algernon treats marriage and courtship with callous apprehension, stating that he "doesn't see anything romantic about proposing. It is very romantic to be in love. But there is nothing romantic about a definite proposal" (*Earnest* 3). In his mind, Algernon does not seem to feel bound by romantic obligations to other women, let alone a single woman for the rest of his life. He is especially candid on his view of monogamy, for example, when he posits that "in married life, three is a company and two is none," which suggests that infidelity is the only assured means of keeping a marriage tolerable (*Earnest* 7). In general, the reader might be surprised to learn that Lady Bracknell probably agrees with Algernon's cynical approach towards marriage when she says that "[she] is not in favour of long engagements," because "they give people the opportunity of finding out each other's character before marriage" (*Earnest* 48). In a sense, both characters seem to represent the duality of Wilde's existence within Victorian society; Algernon, the idle dandy, wishes only to view life as a work of art while his aunt, Lady Bracknell, works desperately to remain a part of her society while simultaneously stifling her own disdain for the superficial doctrine of Victorian morality.

At multiple points throughout the play, Lady Bracknell is consistently employed to represent the moral norms of Victorian society. On a number of occasions, she defends society against Algernon's vehement dismissal of its most coveted conventions, namely marriage and the preservation of virtue, by saying that the only people who disrespect society are "those that can't get into it" (*Earnest* 47). And yet, towards the conclusion of the play when Jack has revealed Algernon's transgressions, Lady Bracknell is quick to defend her nephew from Jack's allegations based on the relative worth of his social reputation. By stating that Algernon couldn't possibly be culpable for his transgressions because he is an "Oxonian," Lady Bracknell is suggesting that an individual is not judged by society based on their moral conduct, but rather the superficial identifiers of their character. She reinforces this claim when she states that Algernon "has nothing but looks everything," and so the fulfillment of his role in society is not based upon personal conduct, but instead his eligibility as a suitor. To that end, I am suggesting that Lady Bracknell's role in *The Importance of Being Earnest* is primarily to maintain and to reinforce the institutionalized values of Victorian society, even if she does not necessarily believe in the validity of those conventions herself. This notion is evident during her infamous cross-examination of Jack, in which Lady Bracknell has prepared a questionnaire to evaluate his suitability for marriage to her daughter Gwendolen. The nature of her inquiries are purely formal, as she prompts Jack to divulge information about his occupation, his capital, his land holdings and his politics, but if Lady Bracknell's responses to Jack's answers are to be taken seriously - even though they are packaged in the typically Wildean form of epigrammatical wit - then the significance of their exchange is nothing short of illuminating. Within the context of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, high society is composed of an aristocratic collective charged with the preservation of Victorian morality, even at the expense of the aristocracy's own confidence

in the system that they are preserving. Marriage, or even courtship to that end, becomes a necessary formality conducted between two interested parties as a consolidation of power, rather than a symbolic ritual based in religious conviction, and the same concept can be inferred from the text concerning the aristocracy's attitude towards monogamy, familial ties, friendship, moral duty and other such ideals.

Family life in *The Importance of Being Earnest* can be construed at best as an inconvenient formality, and is best demonstrated when Algernon tells Jack that "relations are simply a tedious pack of people, who haven't got the remotest knowledge of how to live, nor the smallest instinct about when to die" (*Earnest* 15). His relationship with his aunt, Lady Bracknell, is a prominent example of the formality of familial ties within the text. While she does play a large role in arranging a suitable marriage for Algernon, Lady Bracknell's interests in Algernon are primarily based in her selfish desire to have him arrange the music for her numerous social receptions, even at the expense of the ill-health of his imagined acquaintance, Bunbury. Perhaps the most mystifying element of their discussion rests with Lady Bracknell's recognition that the receptions are purely a matter of decorum, and that her role as a hostess in high society merely serves to appease the expectations of aristocratic convention. The role of the hostess was formalized in English society, and would often become the target of literary criticism; Virginia Woolf, for example, cleverly imagined the perils of hosting a dinner party in her novel *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). Lady Bracknell is equally determined to fulfill her hostessing duties. On the type of music that shall be played at the reception, she directs Algernon to arrange "something that will encourage conversation," as she believes that due to the lateness of the season, "everyone has practically said whatever they had to say, which, in most cases, was probably not so much" (*Earnest* 9). Algernon retorts that regardless of the choice of music, if "one plays good

music, people don't listen, and if one plays bad music people don't talk," which suggests paradoxically that the only logical course of action is for no music to be played at all, because the guests won't have anything to talk about one way or the other. The exchange is amusing, but the passage clearly signals his disinterest in both his aunt and her dinner parties. Algernon's indifference towards his family extends even to younger cousin, Gwendolen, as well.

When Jack first mentions that he has traveled to London on matters of pleasure, and then declares his intent to marry Gwendolen, Algernon responds by saying "I thought you had come up for pleasure? . . . I call that business" (*Earnest* 3). From the ensuing dialogue, it is apparent that Algernon has no illusions about the role of marriage in his society, and thusly shares his aunt's opinion that definite proposals, which he considers separate from romance, are merely a form of business contract between members of the aristocracy. When he says that "he doesn't think [Jack] will ever be married to Gwendolen," Algernon is keenly suggesting that Jack's infatuation with his cousin is primarily out of lust, rather than the acutely Victorian desire to enter into an economically-beneficial agreement. Moreover, he doesn't necessarily consider Gwendolen a lucrative investment when he cryptically informs Jack that she is "utterly devoted to bread and butter," the line itself hinting at Gwendolen's superficiality. The third measure of Algernon's indifference lies with the value that he assigns upon his consent to the marriage arrangement. Unlike his aunt, Algernon doesn't seem interested at all in numbers and figures that might indicate that Jack is a worthy suitor for Gwendolen. Instead, he tells Jack that he will bestow his consent only when Jack explains who Cecily is, which seems a very arbitrary price for an eternal union.

However, Algernon's view of family was hardly uncharacteristic of Victorian attitudes towards domesticity. In her introduction to "Spectacle of Intimacy: A Public Life for the Victorian Family," Karen Chase quotes from a midcentury census when she says:

The first, most intimate, and perhaps most important community, is the FAMILY, not considered as the children of one parent, but as the persons under one head; who is the occupier of the house, the householder, master, husband, or father; while the other members of the family are the wife, children, servants, relatives, visitors, and persons constantly or accidentally in the house. The head of the family supports and rules the family, —occupies the house. "Family," in the sense which it has acquired in England, may be considered the *social unit* of which parishes, towns, counties, and the nation, are composed. (Chase 4)

From the quotation, it is apparent that the Victorian family structure was just as formalized as their other social institutions. At the head of the family is a venerable patriarch, who must do what it takes to support and preserve the reputation of his household. As Chase describes it, the ties between members of a household during the Victorian period were not required to be familial, so long as they served the interests of the head: "This picture of the household as social pyramid— a complex of relations, by no means all biological, that receive their coherence only from the form-giving power of "householder, master, husband, or father"—is not merely a concise sketch of patriarchal domesticity; it is also a rule of methodology" (Chase 5). This concept is indicated within the confines of the text, as Algernon frequently vocalizes his dissociation from family life. Moreover, Wilde inverts the notion of the formalized family structure, with its looming and dominating father-figure as the head, by replacing him entirely

with a woman. Instead of the firm hand of Lord Bracknell guiding the narrative, as the reader might expect to see in earlier novels from the nineteenth century, we are given the authoritarian Lady Bracknell. Wilde's inversion of gender roles is not only comical, in that Lady Bracknell would traditionally have been played by a male actor, but also purposeful as it lends to another theme throughout his comedy, which is the rhetorical deconstruction of the public and private spheres of Victorian life.

In order to be true to Wilde's feminist leanings, it is important that the reader observes that most, if not all of the narrative is driven by women. Although the play opens with a brief glimpse of the male psyche through a farcical dialogue between Algernon and Jack, *Earnest* forces the male characters into primarily reactive roles: Jack is forced to overcome the opposition of Lady Bracknell to his marriage proposal; Algernon is forced to compromise his own identity in order to marry Cecily; Both of the male leads are forced into adapting what we would normally perceive to be societal constants (i.e. our age, our name, our origins) in order to align themselves with the idealistic worldview that the girls have fabricated. Contrary to real-world perceptions of gender roles, Gwendolen insolently suggests that "the home seems to be the proper sphere for the man," and how "once a man begins to neglect his domestic duties he becomes painfully effeminate" (*Earnest* 35). This quotation, which seems to be Wilde's antagonistic view towards the effete-ness of London's high society, succinctly demonstrates a second major inversion of Victorian conventions as it forces the audience to consider the male role in the domestic sphere when society had traditionally placed him in the public. Numerous examples of Wilde's inversion of gender roles can be found throughout the play, and tend to focus on his female characters being granted societal privileges that were traditionally reserved for men.

Jack's ward, Cecily, for example, is encouraged against domesticity by her governess, Miss Prism, who instructs her to pursue intellectual pleasures, such as learning German, instead of "utilitarian occupations" like watering flowers (*Earnest* 21). This specific example of Gwendolen's education is significant as it contrasts with Algernon, who haphazardly mentions to Jack that he makes up for being "occasionally a little over-dressed" by being "always immensely over-educated," which suggests another paradox in terms of Victorian education, that a private education in the home might trump an expensive education at Oxford University (*Earnest* 30). Whereas it was a common literary theme at the time for a woman's perceived naivete to be duly corrected by an enlightened male, as is the case in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879), Wilde chooses to leave the male figure out of the equation entirely. Later on in the play, when Gwendolen rebukes Jack for his pragmatic approach to a marriage proposal by telling him that "we live in an age of ideals," her idealism is swiftly countered by the more experienced Lady Bracknell, who corrects the statement to say that "we live in an age of surfaces" (*Earnest* 10, 47). Wilde's reversal of gender roles, including the spheres in which they had traditionally belonged, constructs a parallel society in his fiction constituted by powerful women, like Lady Bracknell, who serve to contrast with the more effeminate men that remain idle in domesticity. Altogether, Wilde's consistent inversion of established social norms and ideals seem to portray him as one of Victorian society's staunchest opponents. However, despite Wilde's insistence on undermining those norms, it is pertinent to recall that *Earnest* ends on a glaring contradiction.

As mentioned in the beginning, I posited that this paper will seek to explain Wilde's insistence on abandoning social conventions only to reinforce them at the play's conclusion. Now that I have established the moral foundation upon which Victorian society was constructed, I will discuss the implications of living in a society with not only a strict moral code, but a

practiced reticence towards enforcing its own values. In particular, I will be examining the public perception of transgressors in Victorian society, including how or when their transgressions evolve into public scandal, as well as the consequence of negative publicity. As defined by sociologist Ari Adut, a transgression involves “any illicit or incontinent behavior, usually committed in secrecy, that might conflict with a society’s imposed standard of morality” (Adut 213). In relation to *Earnest*, these social concepts are most appropriately demonstrated through the conduct of Algernon Moncrieff and Jack Worthing. These characters serve to exhibit two distinct modes of conduct within Victorian society that are, however controversial, still within the limits of social discretion. Within the narrative, both of the characters are engaged in the consistent transgression of societal norms. Algernon is a reckless socialite and a spendthrift. Although he is a member of the aristocracy, he frequently eschews social obligations and critiques the framework of morality upheld by Victorian society. In order to escape his disdain for city life, Algernon creates a fictitious acquaintance, named Bunbury, whom he imagines to be an insufferable invalid living in the countryside. Although he never assumes this identity directly, as he does later on with a different persona, Algernon uses Bunbury’s ill-health as an excuse to free himself from social obligations, a method that he aptly names “Bunburying” (*Earnest* 6). Granted, it is never explicitly stated what Algernon actually does whilst he is out Bunburying, but his disregard for social institutions like marriage and monogamy suggests that his activities may not be entirely wholesome. As such, it is understood that Algernon uses Bunbury’s ill-health as an excuse for his pursuit of pleasure in the countryside, which is significant in that he is cognizant to the fact that he wouldn’t be able to get away with flaunting his transgressions in London, publicly anyway, and so he resorts to more scrupulous measures in order to ensure that he is able to indulge his passions elsewhere. Within the boundaries of social

decorum, then, Algernon walks a thin line between transgression and scandal, but because his transgressions are never publicized to high society he is granted conditional leniency to continue his pursuits in private. Similar to Algernon, but adhering to an obverse philosophy, Jack Worthing also devises a fictitious relation in order to free himself from obligations, but he freely assumes both of his identities.

Jack is the sole character in the play to frequent both London and the countryside. Consequently, he is known as Jack Worthing in the country and Ernest Worthing in London, but he reconciles not being able to exist in both places at once by pretending that the two personas are estranged brothers. When Algernon first discovers that Jack, who he thinks is Ernest, has an alter ego, he admits to Algernon that he “has always pretended to have a younger brother of the name of Ernest, who lives in the Albany, and gets into the most dreadful scrapes” (*Earnest* 6). By juggling the two identities, Jack presents a moral dichotomy that associates London with pleasure, and the countryside with virtue, and as such, he leads a virtuous life when staying in the country but indulges his vices while in London (*Earnest* 2). Jack’s moral fiber is asserted with multiple character testimonials throughout the narrative, most notably from Miss Prism, who informs Cecily that “[Jack] enjoys the best of health, and his gravity of demeanour is especially to be commended in one so comparatively young as he is. I know no one who has a higher sense of duty and responsibility” (*Earnest* 21). Additionally, she goes on to say that “idle merriment and triviality would be out of place in his conversation. You must remember his constant anxiety about that unfortunate young man, his brother” (*Earnest* 21). Miss Prism’s account is valuable in that it dispels any notion that because Jack leads a double life, then the authenticity of his two fractured identities might be diminished when compared to a single, whole identity. On the contrary, Jack works feverishly to maintain both identities as genuinely as possible, as indicated

in the text when he goes to London in order to propose to Gwendolen. Despite his confession to Algernon that he only comes to London “on matters of pleasure,” Jack goes to great lengths in order to secure his matrimony to Gwendolen, including his interrogation via Lady Bracknell, organizing the luncheon at his country estate, and even religious conversion. It is important to recognize that Jack’s conduct within both realms, the public and the private, is considered exemplary by Victorian standards of social norms and discretion. Jack maintains a firm belief that one should practice modesty and responsibility in public, as represented by his role as Cecily’s dutiful guardian, but allows for the pursuit of pleasure in private while ensuring that his public identity remains pristine. Jack’s idealism rests with his belief that the two cannot coexist together. For him, there is only moral absolutism, as the countryside can only be virtuous and London can only enable vice, and so he feels the need to maintain two separate identities in order to engage both aspects of his moral fiber. Paradoxically, Algernon finds himself at odds with the apparent moral cleanliness of London when he says that the “amount of women in London who flirt with their own husbands is perfectly scandalous. It looks so bad. It is simply washing one’s clean linen in public” (*Earnest* 7). He contrarily suggests, within the time period in which *Earnest* was written, that one should necessarily leave the public realm in order to pursue pleasure on the outskirts of society. But what exactly constitutes Algernon and Jack’s alleged transgressions? The nature of these pleasures is only referred to in abstractions, of course, but to an audience member that was familiar with Wilde’s lifestyle, his subject matter was anything but vague. To that end, many Wilde scholars have since contended that Jack and Algernon’s transgressions are decidedly sexual in their deviancy.

Alan Sinfield posits in "'Effeminacy' and 'Femininity': Sexual Politics in Wilde's Comedies" that *Earnest* as a play is rife with “material allusions to a homosexual subculture”

(Sinfield 34). He goes on to say that, according to Wilde scholar Christopher Craft, the text was less concerned with the multiple references to homosexuality than the author was with intertextual instability, meaning that Wilde was less interested in hiding his knowledge of homosexual subculture than he was with addressing problems of narrative within the text. Sinfield points to numerous examples within the text to demonstrate this point, but most notably he chooses to focus on Wilde's rhetorical inclusion of the term "Bunburying" within the text. From Craft's article "Alias Bunbury: Desire and Termination in *The Importance of Being Earnest*," Sinfield extrapolates seven respects in which *Earnest* as a text "goes Bunburying," which he defines as moments in which "Wilde lifts to liminality his subcultural knowledge of 'the terrible pleasures of a double life'" (Sinfield 34). The first example, albeit minor, is the cigarette case that Algernon confiscates from Jack. Although the item serves to identify a main character that appears later on in the story, Sinfield notes the irony in which cigarette cases manifested themselves in Wilde's own life, particularly at his trial when they were used as evidence against him following *Earnest*'s publication. The second example is Craft's claim that "Bunburying was not only British slang for a male brothel, but was also the term for a homosexual pickup," although Sinfield is quick to express his disagreement with Craft's analysis by stating that it "is a mistake to suppose that Wilde and his audiences 'really' had a concept of gayness like our own" (Sinfield 36). For Sinfield, it is hard to recognize Wilde as a crusader for homosexuality when a large part of his identity has been fabricated nearly a century later, primarily with the surge of queer literature in the 1980's which sought to make Wilde a martyr of the movement. A third example of "Bunburying" within the text is Patricia Behrendt's speculation that Wilde intended to tamper with modern rules of attraction by placing effeminate men (i.e. the dandy) as objects of desire for the play's female characters.

In her book *Oscar Wilde: eros and aesthetics* (1991), Behrendt employs Gwendolen's admission to Cecily that she finds "painfully effeminate men" very attractive, in order to suggest that Wilde intended to tamper with Victorian views of attraction. The obvious paradox here being that "the attraction that the effeminate man would hold for Gwendolen would be his *lack* of sexual interest in her" (Behrendt 175). This interpretation serves to unbalance traditional views of courtship that had typically aligned a powerful and affluent male with a hapless, yet beautiful female. Behrendt thinks that Gwendolen's interest in men of questionable sexual preferences is related to the very nature of the dandy who, despite being "painfully effeminate" as Gwendolen so succinctly put it, "despises responsible, middle-class domesticity and finding nothing better to do, spends his time flirting. He is dangerously attractive because he shows he is available" (Behrendt 176). In this sense, who else better fits the mold of dandiacal pursuits than Algernon Moncrieff, and to a lesser extent, Jack Worthing? As described by Lady Bracknell, her nephew "has nothing but looks everything," which, in her eyes, makes him a fitting representation of the modern male because of his effete nature. Both characters are stripped of their agency from the very beginning of the play, as Jack's attempt to propose to Gwendolen is swiftly curbed by Lady Bracknell, and Algernon's affair with Cecily comes to an end when she discovers that he is leading a double life. If we are to believe scholarly opinion that *Earnest* contains multiple references to a so-called "homosexual subculture," then both Algernon and Jack, as perpetrators of "Bunburying," have committed sexual transgressions by Adut's definition.

The dividing line between transgression and scandal is made clear by Ari Adut in the article "A Theory of Scandal: Victorians, Homosexuality, and the Fall of Oscar Wilde." when he says that "a scandal occurs when a transgression is publicized in a disruptive fashion" (Adut

212). By its very nature, a scandal in the Victorian sense has the potential to destabilize the moral foundation of society unless it is promptly contained. Additionally, Adut contends that scandal “in effect triggers a great deal of the normative solidification and transformation in society. At the same time, avoiding them is an essential motive and ongoing activity of individuals, groups, and institutions” (Adut 213). Thus, it becomes a moral imperative on behalf of the society to reinforce the recognized social norms when a scandal develops, which in most cases involves legal prosecution of the individual at fault and/or their immediate ostracization from society. Adut applies his theory mainly to the trials of Oscar Wilde, and contends that the high-profile nature of the case ensured that Wilde’s punishment would be severe, but he also reasons that Wilde was an unfortunate exception to what was generally a very lenient system of law. Adut claims that although Wilde was condemned and prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law, the “wrath directed at Wilde stands in contrast, however, to the fact that homosexuality norms were rarely and reluctantly enforced in Victorian England” (Adut 214). In respect to the public knowledge of homosexual transgressions, Adut posits that “as long as Wilde did not respond to accusations of his indecency - and the studied equivocalness of the literary insinuations permitted him this option - his well-known homosexuality would not become an unavoidably public matter” (Adut 229) This notion is represented in *Earnest* when Jack reveals the trivial depth of Algernon’s transgressions to his family, that he had consumed a bottle of aged wine, had consumed all of Jack’s muffins, had alienated the affections of Cecily, and finally, that he had assumed the false identity of Jack’s imaginary brother, Ernest. Even under the absurd circumstances, it would not have been fortuitous for Algernon to admit to his transgressions, and so he vies for silence until Lady Bracknell comes swiftly to his defense. Such was the nature of public allegations of indecency, namely homosexuality, in Victorian England.

As long as the offender turned a deaf ear to allegations of their transgressions, then, due to societal reticence and an authoritarian reluctance to create public scandal, the offender was inadvertently free to continue pursuing their vices in private.

This reluctance to enforce homosexuality laws may be characterized as society's tendency towards reticence, or a willful reluctance to speak freely, especially on matters of social indiscretion. Reticence was partially in effect due to the strict libel laws in place during Wilde's time, laws that he attempted to use against the Marquess of Queensberry to his own destruction, but also because publicity was considered disreputable. Individuals in Victorian society were deeply committed to privacy, a notion that Adut seems to agree with when he states that "reticence, as the prime requisite of respectability, was the paramount principle of the 19th-century English public sphere" (Adut 222). Reticence, then, along with the Victorian family's longing for privacy, as well as a fear of exposure, meant that most social transgressions would go unpunished so long as the offender displayed even a modicum of discretion. Both Algernon and Jack, then, demonstrate two acceptable modes of conduct within their society. Moreover, even though Algernon is the most at risk for creating a scandal, he is never punished by society because his transgressions never leave the constraints of the private realm. By the end of the play, only his immediate family knows that he has been leading a double life, and so he is free to continue his pursuit of pleasure so long as his conduct remains in line with societal expectations. These expectations are derived from social norms, which in a Victorian setting would have included eventual marriage and the creation of a family unit. This concept is clearly indicated within the text and manifests itself as the one glaring contradiction that I mentioned earlier, the observation that *Earnest* insists on abandoning social conventions throughout the play only to reinforce them by its conclusion. Because Algernon and Jack do eventually align themselves

with societal expectations by getting married, and presumably starting a family, they are awarded the same conditional leniency that Wilde was himself allowed for the duration of his marriage to Constance. However, judging from the outcome of Wilde's subsequent exile from high society, one might notice the irony in Wilde's suggestion that the best way to conduct oneself in Victorian society is to transgress in private without disturbing the system by flaunting them in public.

Works Cited

- Adams, James Eli. "Victorian Scandals: Representations of Gender and Class." *Victorian Studies* 36.4 (1993): 473+. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 5 Apr. 2016. Web.
- Adut, Ari. "A Theory of Scandal: Victorians, Homosexuality, and the Fall of Oscar Wilde." *American Journal of Sociology* 111.1 (2005): 213–248. Web.
- Behrendt, Patricia F. *Oscar Wilde: Eros and Aesthetics*. London: Macmillan, 1991. Print.
- Chase, Karen, and Levenson, Michael. "Spectacle of Intimacy : A Public Life for the Victorian Family." Princeton, NJ, USA: Princeton University Press, 2000. ProQuest ebrary. Web. 11 April 2016.
- Reed, John R. *Victorian Conventions*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1975. Print.
- Sinfield, Alan. "'Effeminacy' and 'Femininity': Sexual Politics in Wilde's Comedies." *Modern Drama* 37.1 (Spring 1994): 34-52. Rpt. in *Drama Criticism*. Ed. Scott T. Darga. Vol. 17. Detroit: Gale, 2002. *Literature Resource Center*. Web.
- Walvin, James. *Victorian Values*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1987. Print.
- Wilde, Oscar. *The Importance of Being Earnest*. 1899. New York: Dover Publications, Inc, 1990. Print.