

“Earnest-ness” in the 21st Century: The Graphic Diary, Tattoo, and Lie in Oliver Parker’s 2002 Film

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Abstract: The Importance of Being Earnest (1895) is not only a great comedy in itself, but because it marks both the high point and the downfall of Wilde’s career, it has been closely read and interpreted with special attention to its “hidden” meaning and significance. While the 1952 film version of the play has been considered a classic in its handling of comic effects, it is suggested that the film rendition takes the play further in its exploration of the “hidden” sexual agenda. This film is not only an interesting reinvention of the play in terms of the freedom the director exercises in the creation of visual sequences which are not in the original play but indeed very much part of a 21st century multimedia mentality. It incorporates many changes our sensibilities have undergone because of psychoanalysis, film language development in the second half of the 20th century, gender theory, the development of communication technology, as well as the popularization of multimedia visual communication methods which have great impact on the way audiences receive and understand a film’s text. From the marketing point of view, this all-star cast is certainly a guarantee of talked-about-ness and box office return. The choice of Rupert Everett as Algernon shows an extra dimension of the play than just a director’s concern for box office return. His sexual orientation has long been known not only to people in the business but also to the general public. His autobiographical writings have been a personal confession to the readers his sexual orientation and his views about the show business. The choice of Everett as Algernon, the fun-loving, joyfully irresponsible dandy who seems to have the ability to make instant conquest adds to the fun and discussion concerning the depth of the questionable “earnestness” in the play.

Keywords: Earnest, Erotic Fantasy, Gender Representation, Truthfulness

OSCAR WILDE’S CONVICTION and being sentenced to two years’ hard labour for “committing acts of gross indecency with other male persons” in 1895 made him the first celebrity in England to be jailed for his sexual orientation. At the height of his career then, with two plays (*An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*) being produced at the same time in the London Theatre, Wilde’s downfall came as a dramatic and poignant final curtain to his brilliant but short-lived literary career. Read against the background of Wilde’s conviction, his final play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which features two bachelors inventing alternative identities so that they can have an easier life, the play cannot help but be tinted with the burden of the playwright’s “other” sexual life, making it more than just a comedy of confused identities. Besides seeing it as a well-crafted comedy of manners, interpretations of this play very often take on the playwright’s biographical circumstances and analyze it as also embodying the underlying sexual beliefs held by Oscar Wilde the playwright.

One example is the meaning of the title of the play – while a simple summary of the play will show that the “Earnest” in the title is a double-entendre referring to having a serious and sincere demeanour, and at the same time being a person with the particular name of Earnest, some have attributed a third meaning to the word as a code-word in the 19th century

gay culture to mean “being gay”. Theo Aronson’s book *Prince Eddy and the Homosexual Underworld* (1994), which is a study of the gay culture at the end of the 19th century London, is cited as a source giving an explanation of some of the vocabulary used among gay men then.¹ However, Sir Donald Sinden, who had met two of the play’s original participants in the 1940s (Irene Vanbrugh, the first Gwendolen; Allan Aynesworth, the first Algy) as well as Lord Alfred Douglas, wrote to *The Times* to dispute that the idea of “code-words” in the play such as “Cecily” as a synonym for a rentboy.² He wrote on the 2 February 2001 issue that:

[a]lthough they had ample opportunity, at no time did any of them even hint that Earnest was a synonym for homosexual, or that Bunburying may have implied homosexual sex. The first time I heard it mentioned was in the 1980s and I immediately consulted Sir *John Gielgud* whose own performance of Jack Worthing in the same play was legendary and whose knowledge of theatrical lore was encyclopaedic. He replied in his ringing tones: “No-No! Nonsense, absolute nonsense: I would have known.”

Guardian listed the belief that ‘Earnest’ was a code-word for ‘gay’ and wearing a green carnation was a ‘secret’ sign of homosexuality” as one of the most popular misconceptions relating to Oscar Wilde. It suggested that they were convenient inventions, from the fact that Edward Carson did not use them as part of the evidence in the trial as he did other supposedly gay passages in magazines and in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* when he defended the Marquess of Queensberry in the libel trial.³

Despite (or because of) the inconclusive discussion concerning the code-words Wilde had supposedly littered the play with, *The Importance of Being Earnest* remains Wilde’s most reviewed and revived work today. Not only is it produced on the stage at regular intervals, there are also notable film adaptations which help to popularize this masterpiece of 19th century literary and dramatic art among the general public. The 1952 film version, featuring Dame Edith Evans, whose delivery of “A handbag?” in response to Jack/Earnest’s reply concerning his origin becomes one of the most memorable lines in modern drama because of the complex mixture of incomprehension, disbelief, shock, contempt, and horror she managed to squeeze into the two words. Over the years there have been numerous revivals, modernizations, and adaptations of the play in different mediums because there is something in the play which still appeals to audiences of different ages and cultures. This paper presents a reading of one of these adaptations, the 2002 film directed by Oliver Parker, to argue that in many ways, despite the negative comments about how the story has been handled, this new millennium version is faithful in many ways to the Wildean spirit of being “a trivial comedy for serious people”.

¹ Christopher Roland, “Literary analysis: The Importance of Being Earnest, by Oscar Wilde”, <http://www.helium.com/items/1210962-literary-analysis-the-importance-of-being-earnest-by-oscar-wilde> (29 July 2010). In the short article, Roland mentioned Richard Ellmann’s 1987 biography *Oscar Wilde* as the definitive study of Wilde, and chapter 8 of Karl Beckson’s *London in the 1890s: A Cultural History* (1992) as giving details about the underworld of gay culture at the time.

² “The Importance of Being Earnest: Possible Inside Jokes”, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Importance_of_Being_Earnest#Possible_inside_jokes (28 July 2010)

³ “The 10 most popular misconceptions about Oscar Wilde” <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/may/07/top10s.oscar.wilde> (28 July 2010)

While the 1952 version feels more like a mere recording of a stage play (I do not mean to discredit the value of that wonderful production), this 2002 version “feels” more like a film to audiences who have been trained by experience with the mainstream commercial motion pictures. Instead of meeting Algernon Moncrieff in his flat while he is having a conversation with his servant Lane, the audience are fed information about this character in the opening sequence of the film through action – an exciting night-time chase-and-escape between Algy and his creditors to show his character as a spendthrift and a charming gentleman who can rely on his charisma to get out of tight corners. The introduction of Jack Worthing is similarly done with background information concerning the character given to the audience through a more visual/filmic means (the scenic setting of the large country house, and his solemn instructions concerning his ward’s education) which will be understood by viewers with some experience of the film medium. I cite details of this kind just to show that director Parker is telling the story of the drama in a film’s medium, and truly maximizing the medium’s capacity to relate sequences and ideas in its unique way.

Although there have been quite a number of criticisms about “additional” visual materials such as the examples above that the director added to the play, it must not be forgotten that drama and film are two different mediums with their own strengths. Drama’s focus is on the words and demands more imagination from the audience while film guides the audience by its powerful visual images and movements. A film director trying to communicate the messages of a drama in adaptation will need to translate and traverse across the barriers of medium, time and culture. Wilde’s comedy, depending so much on the power of the words to carry the plot, can defeat not only the general audience, but also the actors participating. In Rupert Everett’s autobiography, *Red Carpets and Other Banana Skins* (2006), he talks about such difficulties in the filming experience:

As part of my research, I was smoking a lot of pot during *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Strictly for the role, of course, and I was always trying to persuade Frothy, as I now called him, or Collywobbles, that he would find the day less boring, and Oscar’s bons mots less laborious on the lips, if he had a puff or two.⁴

Even when readers take this entry from Everett’s autobiography with a pinch of salt, either because of the nature of the writing or because of Everett’s reputation, it is still a good indication of the difficulty people may have understanding literary works from a different time and perhaps culture. To experienced readers of literary works, Wilde’s witticism may be fascinating, but to the ordinary public, Wildean witticism in its original undiluted form may be closer to “laborious”, as suggested here by the actor himself.

Sometimes these “updating” is more than making it “sound right” to contemporary audience. Very often it is a translation of another age and culture into something that contemporary audiences can identify with. Colin Firth commented on Victorian England:

One of the things that amuses me about Victorian England as an idea – and Oliver Parker’s captured that in this film, is that all these corseted people, all these utterly kind

⁴ Rupert Everett, *Red Carpets and Other Banana Skins*, NY: Warner Books, 2006, p. 154. “Frothy” and “Collywobbles” are both nicknames Everett used to refer to Colin Firth.

of repressed and austere people were studying the classics, which featured nothing but sex, really.⁵

To say that classics feature “nothing but sex” may be exaggerating, but what Firth is saying here about the discrepancy between our impression of the very prim and proper Victorian Society and the really rather prominent presence of sex in that culture has been discussed insightfully and with wide range of references to the social institutions by Foucault. After all, one must not forget that the late 19th century was the time when the poorer parts of London were stalked by serial killers, the most famous being Jack the Ripper.⁶ It was also a time when doubts about human nature were represented and discussed in a text such as *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.⁷ Parker’s changing the location of Jack and Algy’s meeting to a dance hall where scantily dressed dance girls interacted with well-dressed gentlemen (with Algy and Earnest as examples) in an intimate manner was perhaps another attempt to show one of the “real” faces of Victorian society, and to comment on the gender relations of the time.

Perhaps one of the most severely criticized additions to the film is the flashback sequence featuring Finty Williams (daughter of Judi Dench, who played Lady Bracknell) as the young woman who will become Lady Bracknell – a chorus girl then. It was considered “spoiling the rhythm of Wilde’s shapely comic scenes with fuzzy business” by David Ansen in his review in *Newsweek*.⁸ Rhythm of the scenes aside, this rather sexist way of presenting the most powerful female figure in the play is worthy of discussion. On the one hand, we have Everett claiming that he coveted the role and would like to play it in drag,⁹ denoting how women with power are perceived as masculine. On the other hand, we do have very exceptional female characters in this play, especially in the 3-act version which Wilde revised under George Alexander the producer’s advice. Comparing various aspects between the original 4-act version and the 3-act version for performance, Thienpont found a “fortification of the position of the play’s women.”¹⁰ Cecily, for example, became “impressively strong and determined,”¹¹ for after hearing about Earnest, the legendary wicked brother of her guardian, she wrote love letters for him to herself. Gwendolen in the 3-act version is the “sophisticated, fashionable woman of the town” who showed absolute mobility.¹² And Dench, who played the 2002 Lady Bracknell, felt that “she’s frightfully flirtatious”, and pointed out that “[t]here are so many allusions to how fond Lady Bracknell is of Algy par-

⁵ ‘Colin Firth in *The Importance of Being Earnest*’, <http://www.firth.com/earnest.html> (24 February 2009).

⁶ “Jack the Ripper” was the self-named serial killer who committed at least five murders in 1888 in Whitechapel district of London. The victims were female prostitutes who had suffered abdominal mutilation and organs removal. The killer was never brought to justice or identified, thus the cases had remained a mystery even now.

⁷ The fiction *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) written by Robert Louis Stevenson was set in 19th century London. A scientist Dr. Henry Jekyll developed a potion which brought out his hidden personality, when he then became Mr. Hyde. The evil and violent Mr. Hyde committed atrocities and finally became uncontrollable. Dr. Jekyll had to kill himself to stop Mr. Hyde. This fiction has been a famous literary text representing a split personality.

⁸ David Ansen, ‘Wilde at Heart: Costume comedy in the grand Miramax tradition’, *Newsweek*, 27 May 2002, 139. 21, p. 67. <http://www.newsweek.com/id/64630/page/1> (7 February 2009).

⁹ Rupert Everett, *Red Carpets and Other Banana Skins*, (NY: Warner Books, 2006, p.154).

¹⁰ Eva Thienpont, ‘From Faltering Arrow to Pistol Shot: *The Importance of Being Earnest*’, *Cambridge Quarterly*, 33:3 (2004) 246.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 251.

¹² Sos Eltis, *Revising Wilde: Society and subversion in the plays of Oscar Wilde*. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1996, p. 182.

ticularly, and then there is poor old ailing Lord B. stuck up in a room with a tray.”¹³ Indeed, it was true that Algy drew Lady Bracknell into another room to give Earnest the chance to be alone with Gwendolen, but he was also offering a chance for Lady Bracknell to be alone with him – we viewers are shown how much Lady Bracknell enjoys his company.

It is in the representation of these exceptional female characters that some of the scenes were criticised in this film. Gwendolen, showing her determination that she had Earnest burnt into herself that she was shown getting a tattoo of Earnest’s name on her body, then she drove a (1920s style) car to Earnest’s country house to find him. Cecily kept a diary, but it was a huge book with elaborate drawings depicting different erotic fantasies. The old fashioned Miss Prism’s criticism of Cecily’s behaviour only helps to show how independent in thought Cecily is. Even the gorgon Lady Bracknell had some very unconventional ideas about gender qualities. When she questioned Jack about his worthiness for her daughter, she said, “I have always been of opinion that a man who desires to get married should know either everything or nothing. Which do you know?” When Jack answered that he knew nothing, her satisfaction turned common belief upside down:

I am pleased to hear it. I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance. Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit; touch it and the bloom is gone... Fortunately in England, at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever.¹⁴

The comic effect of reversing what is commonly believed and respected is certainly a consideration in the construction of lines such as this. Yet, it is clear that in the 3-act version of the play, the women characters came out much stronger, more independent, intelligent and the laughs are usually at the expense of the men characters. And Parker’s film adaptation has sustained this trait of strong female characters in both the things he keeps from the play and things that he adds in the film.

One of the choices Parker has made to maintain the original spirit of the Wildean comedy is the adding back of what is known as “The Gribbsby Episode”.¹⁵ “Earnest” has to be taken away because he owed the Savoy Hotel £762.14.2. The “Earnest” who accumulated such an enormous bill at the Savoy is Jack (as “Earnest” in town), but because Algy is now claiming to be Earnest, he is taken away instead. This is funny not only because Algy is wrongly punished – he only claims to be Earnest so that he can get to know Cecily – but because even Jack is only claiming to be Earnest. Earnest is just a name, but because someone starts using it, it quickly acquires different meanings and value depending on the user of the name. And why does Jack claim to be Earnest when he isn’t (as far as he knows)? A major difference that Thienpont sees in the 3-act version of the play is the character Jack and what his actions may mean:

Wilde now invites the audience to identify Jack with the stock melodrama character of the Gentleman, only to disturb its stereotyped apprehensions: Jack is in fact conservative to the core, but *as such* has to have recourse to a double life from time to time. In the

¹³ ‘Colin Firth in *The Importance of Being Earnest*’, <http://www.firth.com/earnest.html> (24 February 2009).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 266.

¹⁵ Ryan Hunt. “Oliver Parker’s film adaptation of Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*.” *The Victorian Web*. <http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/wilde/hunt2.html> (21 July 2010)

final version, conservative Victorian gentlemen prove unable to live up constantly to the seriousness and truthfulness expected of them.¹⁶

Algy the dandy uses bunburying to lead a life of pleasure, but Jack the true Victorian gentleman has to resort to bunburying to escape from the suffocating demands for truthfulness in his society. Seen in this way, the Gribbsy Episode highlights the fakeness of the name Earnest through the little unfortunate misunderstanding about Algy's greediness. I agree with Thienpont that "[t]ruthfulness, or indeed earnestness, is Wilde's main target in the play, and he ultimately calls upon the gentleman to establish the truth of masks."¹⁷

The film director's intention to highlight Wilde's subversion of truthfulness can further be seen in his casting of the actors. When the production of this all-star cast of 2002 *The Importance of Being Earnest* was announced, there was a lot of talk about the two male leads. Colin Firth has quite a respectable film career, and has had a track-record as a "heartthrob", in particular since his role as Mr. Darcy in the BBC version of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1995), which was one reason why he was cast for Mark Darcy in *Bridget Jones' Diary* (2001). His image is very similar to that of the Mark Darcy role he played – a gentleman, somewhat shy and not easily expressing his love to his beloved woman.¹⁸ Rupert Everett has established a very different image. In their first film together, *Another Country* (1984), Firth and Everett were both students of a traditional English boarding school: Firth was an angry Marxist and Everett played the role of a homosexual. Working together on a film after 18 years, they were asked a lot about how they did not get along in the previous film and how things had or had not changed. Everett wrote in his autobiography about his feelings when he knew that Firth was cast to play Jack in this new film:

Even though I had done my utmost that he should not be cast at all – I coveted his role for myself, as I wanted to play both brothers and lady Bracknell – time had worked wonders on us both. He was no longer the grim *Guardian* reader in sandals; he no longer took the missionary position on everything. (His parents had been in the business of saving souls, despite their son's image of being an upper-class cad.) And I was perhaps slightly less brash, less nasty, less self-obsessed.¹⁹

When we look at Everett's entry again we must remember that it was written by Everett the famous British actor who has openly discussed his sexual orientation (sometimes homosexual and sometimes bisexual) and who is honest about the impact this has on his professional life.²⁰ Although Everett remarked in his autobiography that he was often given a gay character to play, yet his coming out has not stopped him from receiving other role offers. In this

¹⁶ Eva Thienpont, 'From Faltering Arrow to Pistol Shot: *The Importance of Being Earnest*', *Cambridge Quarterly*, 33.3 (2004), 254.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Colin Firth's started his film career in 1984, and has played many different roles, but his appeal has always been to women. In 2009, in *A Single Man*, directed by Tom Ford, he played a homosexual man named George who missed his beloved partner so much that he decided to kill himself. That role earned him a lot of nominations and it was generally very well-received, but it is not really his signature image.

¹⁹ Rupert Everett, *Red Carpets and Other Banana Skins*, (NY: Warner Books, 2006, p.154).

²⁰ In 2007 Rupert Everett worked with Colin Firth in another film titled *St. Trinian's*, a funny film about an extremely unconventional girls' boarding school, directed by Oliver Parker. Everett played both roles of Miss Camilla Fritton (in drag), St. Trinian's Head Mistress, and Carnaby Fritton, Camilla's brother. Colin Firth played Geoffrey Thwaites, the education minister, with whom Miss Fritton has a previous relationship.

case, despite some criticisms about the acting ability of Everett, his being cast for Algernon has brought interesting dimensions to this film version of Algy, an upper class dandy, a charmer, a spendthrift, and a top-class bunburyist who has no qualms calling himself Algy, or Bunbury, or Earnest if there is a need; for Rupert Everett himself is an example of a professional “bunburyist” in his various roles. While Cecily and Gwendolen are obsessed with a name, Jack, and certainly Algy, have both demonstrated to the audience that the name has no essential truth to it, and can be taken up and put down anytime they like.

Finally, Parker’s alteration of the end of the story leaves the audience in no doubt that this film is trying to carry the message of the Wildean comedy to the 21st century audience. In Wilde’s play, when the famous handbag is brought out for Miss Prism’s inspection, the mystery of Jack’s identity is basically solved. What is left for him to do to achieve final happiness is to find out his real Christian name, which Lady Bracknell remembers to the same as his father’s. Jack reads from the Army List that his father’s name is Ernest John Moncrieff, and exclaims, “Gwendolen, 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?”²¹ In the 2002 film, after Jack reads the Army List and calmly declares that he has been telling the truth the whole time, Lady Bracknell refers to the record and the audience has a perspective shot of the page, showing that actually “John Moncrieff” is printed on the page. At this moment, Lady Bracknell looks at Jack meaningfully and comments that he is “displaying signs of triviality”, whereby Jack retorts that he now recognizes the vital importance of being Earnest, confirming his intention to lie (as well as acknowledging the importance of having the name that his beloved desires).

So in the 2002 film the two Bunburyists are lying throughout the film and that they remain liars to the end, moreover endorsed by Lady Bracknell, a representative of authority in the fashionable society. At the end of the film, although we see Jack submitting to the painful experience of having Gwendolen’s name tattooed on his body (and Gwendolen at his side giving him what encouragement and consolation she can), the audience know that there is really no earnest respect for names as a carrier of identity, or in fact, any respect for any believed values at all in the space of the film. Eltis remarks that,

Earnest is not a political tract, for politics, like morality, education, religion, justice, and every other serious matter, are reduced to absurdity by the author’s willful touch. The play is, however, a realization of Wilde’s most idealistic theories of self-development. Earnest’s world has no authority, no laws, and, most delightful of all, no consequences. The perfectly crafted comic dialogue almost imperceptibly subverts all it touches, from the value of money and social position to the creed of just punishment.²²

The film’s deliberate revelation of Jack’s lie and Lady Bracknell’s subsequent remark is in line with this view – recalling Wilde’s philosophy, that “we should treat all the trivial things of life seriously and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality.”²³ This

²¹ Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays*. London: Penguin, 1986, p. 313.

Sos Eltis. *Revising Wilde: Society and subversion in the plays of Oscar Wilde*. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1996, 199-200.

²³ Hesketh Pearson. *The Life of Oscar Wilde*. London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1946, 256.

view is certainly echoed in how the two young ladies receive their beloveds' explanation for lying about their names. While Gwendolen asks Cecily if she believes Algy's explanation, she replies, "I don't. But that does not affect the wonderful beauty of his answer."²⁴ And Gwendolen confirmed, "True. In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing."²⁵ With an outspoken homosexual/bisexual actor playing Algy, and his actually wanting to play both the brothers and Lady Bracknell; with Cecily graphically painting her erotic fantasies in her diary; with determined Gwendolen having the most important (but non-existent) name written on her body; with the chorus girl transforming herself into Lady Bracknell; and with the final revelation to the audience that "Earnest", which has been the centre of the entire film, is but an empty name which has never any substance, the film has continued Wilde's discussion of truthfulness in a way that can be understood by contemporary film audience. The "happy ending" is not only a moment of lovers reunited, but also a celebration of the earnestness of lying. Appearance, what can be seen, and what is claimed, is all - as Lady Bracknell describes Algy, "He has nothing, but he looks everything. What more can one desire?"²⁶

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²⁴ Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays*. London: Penguin, 1986, p. 301.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

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