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The Contest of Naming Between Ladies in THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

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In Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, male characters name themselves to achieve their desires and female characters name others to exert power and ultimately provide the inevitable happy ending. Act 2 presents naming as a cause of tension between Jack and Algernon as they fight for the same name and as an embodiment of conflict between Gwendolen and Cecily who think they are engaged to the same Ernest. The rivalry between Gwendolen and Cecily takes the form of a contest of naming as they use varying terms of address to define each other. "Names," according to Dale Spencer, "are essential for the construction of reality for without a name it is difficult to accept the existence of an object, an event, a feeling" (163). In the case of Gwendolen and Cecily's first meeting in act 2, each character's struggle to impose her reality on the other is played out through naming and ends up creating a spoken fight for comic effect.

Gwendolen and Cecily's conversation is a viciously courteous battle in which both women attempt to define the existence of their opponent through rapidly shifting expressions of identity that equate to little more than name-calling. Even before they think they are engaged to the same Ernest, a well-mannered animosity is made apparent and instigated by naming. Gwendolen and Cecily's conversation begins with expected formality that quickly gives way to an enforced intimacy. Gwendolen asks, "I may call you Cecily, may I not?" and "And you will always call me Gwendolen, won't you?" (Wilde 38). Gwendolen's imperative questions neither inquire nor challenge but demand obedient acquiescence. Cecily's response, "If you

wish,” brings naming to mutual agreement, but its dismissive tone implies an innate antagonism. According to Gwendolen, the terms of address are “quite settled,” and Cecily agrees with a less than certain “I hope so” (38) that only fuels expectations for a dramatic clash.

Gwendolen’s insistence on intimate address allows her to ask direct and probing questions about Cecily’s role at Manor House. For Cecily, the intimacy of the conversation provides her with the opportunity to confide the news of her engagement in “Dearest Gwendolen” (40). Gwendolen is the first to think they are both engaged to the same man at the beginning of a supremely comic sequence of dramatic irony. Cecily’s use of *dearest* as an affectionate address is contrasted against Gwendolen’s patronizing use of “My darling Cecily” (40), which, through dramatic irony, is an instance of Gwendolen attempting to assert her dominance over Cecily. The shift from the demonstrative *dearest* to *dear* signals the demise of affection and implies the interjectional despair of each speaker—as in “oh dear.” The use of *dear*, when both women believe they have a superior claim to Ernest, supports their diaries as formal documents addressed against the other woman. The realization that the other woman’s claim cannot be immediately dismissed produces a pronounced formality of address that parallels the thinly veiled animosity of the tea ceremony. Cecily’s superiority during tea, giving Gwendolen sugar in her tea and serving cake rather than bread and butter, is balanced with Gwendolen’s aside, calling Cecily a “detestable girl” (42). The use of formal names, “Miss Fairfax” and “Miss Cardew,” in the presence of servants emphasizes and attempts to secure the other woman’s unmarried status. The departure of the servants after tea brings the relationship to the apex of antagonism and provides the most opportune and comic moment for the arrival of Jack and Algernon.

Jack and Algernon’s entrance further degenerates the terms of address as Gwendolen and Cecily disdainfully describe their opposite as “this young lady,” denying each character an individual identity (42, 43). The contributions of Jack and Algernon to the terms of address—“dear little Cecily” (42) and “good heavens Gwendolen” (43), respectively—offer a fleeting resolution only to be replaced by Gwendolen and Cecily’s appreciative acknowledgment of each other in the absence of their ideal identity as Ernest’s fiancée. Gwendolen and Cecily’s use of changing terms of address to assert dominance is interrupted by their rejection of male naming and shifts to collaborative naming of each other in exaggerated terms of affection: “My poor wounded Cecily” and “My sweet wronged Gwendolen” (43). Having established a mutual sympathy with Cecily, Gwendolen returns to an

imperative question: “You will call me sister, will you not?” (43). Cecily’s lack of response and the unspoken and mutual agreement about the importance of Ernest’s true identity means terms of address are now “quite settled” (38). Jack’s act 1 prediction that “half an hour after they have met, they [Gwendolen and Cecily] will be calling each other sister,” with Algernon’s addition that “Women only do that when they have called each other a lot of other things first,” is fulfilled (22).

The power of naming is frequently ascribed to men. Initially, it would seem that Jack and Algernon have fashioned their own identities and Gwendolen and Cecily are left struggling against each other in a contest of naming. However, Jack and Algernon’s names for Gwendolen and Cecily are rejected, along with the male-sanctioned identity as fiancée that, in the case of Gwendolen and Cecily, originates from female initiative. Jack and Algernon can only predict the contest and resolution between Gwendolen and Cecily. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the authority to name is taken from the social and religious institution of Reverend Chausible’s baptismal font and given to the matriarchal figure of Lady Bracknell who, for Jack, is deferred to as “the lady who can tell you who you really are” (57) and authorizes the army lists Jack consults for his father’s name as if they were merely offering suggestions: “Yes, I remember now that the General was called Ernest” (58). Lady Bracknell endorses the romantic ending by naming Jack and sanctioning his existence as Ernest. Gwendolen and Cecily endeavor to use terms of address to gain a superior position by defining the existence of their opponent but instead create humor for the audience, who perceive their mutual deception as to the existence of Ernest and are reassured by the inevitable resolution of the relationship. Safe within dramatic irony, the ineffective attempts of both characters to assert dominance through polite terms of address represent an indirect antagonism that makes hidden animosity instantly recognizable. In the conversation between Gwendolen and Cecily, comedy is derived from terms of address that represent conflict and are just as quickly used to initiate peace.

Works Cited

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