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WHO'S THE BIGGER (WO)MAN IN OSCAR WILDE'S *THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST*?

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Abstract. *In this paper the authors explore the characteristics and behaviour of male characters in Wilde's drama* ***The Importance of Being Ernest*** *which imply their homosexuality. In contrast, female characters in the play are presented as asexual and androgynous persons that assume the role of pater familias. Having tackled the topic of homosexuality and morality, Oscar Wilde endeavoured in changing social attitudes and beliefs, thus paving the way to the ideas of sexual revolution of 20th century.*

Key words: *Wildean characters, ambivalent males, androgynous females*

The Wildean figure, as seen from a twenty-first century perspective, was the literary embodiment of the late-Victorian dandy. Knee breeches, red waistcoats, velvet jackets and a massive fur coat were indispensable clothing items in the Dublin-born fashionista's wardrobe. The witty Irishman was also known for his meticulous attention to detail. He chain-smoked gold-tipped cigarettes. His ring featured a large green beetle. The button-hole of his jacket, invariably decorated with some expensive flower, injected glamour into his outfits (as reported in Keyes 1996:3). The late-Victorian dandy's sartorial credentials bear striking resemblance to those of today's fashion gay lobby. The vast majority of Italian and French designers are known for flashing around their fashionable clothes, speaking in a rather languid voice (leading the pack is Valentino's melancholy Italian idiolect) and putting on the catwalk male models that look like the mid-twentieth-century stereotype of the queer man. Think of Dolce&Gabanna's male model working the catwalk in fuchsia tailored satin pants, oriental patterned jacket and brocade bag. Think of pinstripe white suits as Valentino's trademark. Imagine hearing the openly gay Yves Saint Laurent say "I found my style through women. That's where its strength and vitality comes from".[1]

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[1] "French designer Yves Saint Laurent is dead." 1 Jun. 2008. *Breitbartbcom*. Web. 8 Jun. 2008.

Within the sexual ecology of Western civilization effeminacy is believed to be largely synonymous with the image of a modern queer. Sinfield (1994) claims that it is the Wildean effeminate dandy figure that has served as the blueprint for the traditional queer man. Wilde displays flamboyant effeminacy in his speech, dress, mannerisms and his worship of aesthetic beauty. His fashionable clothing and camp behaviour make him the intellectual guru of much of today's fashion milieu which ostentatiously uses mass media for self-advertisement and promotion of its queer tendencies/preferences. As the pioneer of self-promotion, this effeminate aesthete had produced quite a stir within the Victorian public when his indulgence in *Love that dare not speak its name* first came to light.[2] The relentless sex drive towards young men is what had him trailed and sentenced to two years' imprisonment with hard labour. In retrospect, it might seem difficult not to acknowledge the fact that Wilde trials and his subsequent imprisonment marked a manifest in the history of development of the modern homosexual identity. What the prudish late-Victorian society failed to see during the three trials was the concept of queerness as the twenty-first century viewer has come to see it. The reason for such short-sightedness must be, argues Sinfield, the fact that "our interpretation is retroactive". Wilde's persona and writings appear queer to us because "our stereotypical notion of male homosexuality derives from Wilde and our ideas about him" (Sinfield 1994:vii). Suffice it to say that the bulky six-foot-three, effeminate extravagantly overdressed Wildean figure did not produce male homosexuality, as the notion had already existed in ancient Greece (Dover gives a vivid account of this in his *Greek Homosexuality*). Oscar Wilde helped to produce it with particular sexual and cultural undertones. He certainly could not foresee this, but his oeuvre speaks for itself and demonstrates to the modern reader to what extent his instincts and intelligence were unmistaken when he first made the self-fulfilling prophecy that "Somehow or other, I'll be famous, and if not famous, I'll be notorious"[3].

Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* treats effeminacy as an essential component in the modern homosexual identity kit. The author describes the modern category of homosexuality as "[…] a certain way of inverting the masculine and the feminine in oneself" (Foucault 1978:95-96). This foundational Foucauldian programmatic statement delineates the emergence of the homosexual as the result of gender transitivity, "a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphrodism of the soul" (Foucault 1978:95-96). The androgynous figures of a male feminine characterised by a woman's soul trapped in a man's body and a female masculine characterised by the shrewdness of her aggressive and intuitive wit seem to form the very core of sexual politics in *The Importance of Being Earnest.* Staging much of the social interaction that takes place in the morning room of the luxuriously furnished flat of Half-Moon Street and the drawing room at the Manor House are Mr. Algernon Moncrieff and Mr. Jack Worthing, idle late-Victorian bachelors, and Gwendolen Fairfax and Cecily Cardew, their well-bred beloveds. Of the play's male heroes, Algie is more the effeminate aesthete. He speaks in a rather languid voice and is always over-dressed parading in some of his most extravagant outfits up and down his luxuriously and artistically furnished flat. In addition, dear old Algie seems to know a great deal about the finer things of life such as art, music, poetry, fashion and aestheticism, this last one being

[2] Oxford undergraduate periodical titled the *Chameleon*, published for one issue only in 1894, and featured Alfred Lord Douglas's *Two Loves,* written in September 1892, identifying same-sex desire as a *"Love that dare not speak its name"*.

[3] Unapologetic about his flamboyant hunger for attention, Wilde told this to an Oxford classmate on one occasion (qtd. in Keyes 1996:3)

something he most earnestly aspires to. His overeducated persona also gives him every right to discuss and ridicule fine arts, the knowledge of which he so elegantly displays throughout the play. *Earnest*'s effeminate aesthete engages with gay abandon in all kinds of debauchery such as drinking, gambling and living beyond his means as he often puts himself in Queer Street. It is through such careless passivity and high-brow pastime that the play's leading dandy pays homage to Wilde's "cultivated leisure" as "the aim of man" (Keyes 1996:20).

Though he considers Algie's dandified nature to be ridiculous and his conduct an outrage, in practice Jack Worthing does not appear reluctant to Mr. Moncrieff's idea of cultivated leisure. The two men take great pleasure in drinking escapades in which they actively engage with other idle gents at London's bachelor rooms. Another escapade *Earnest*'s bachelors actively take part in is Bunburying. This highly sophisticated concept built upon deliberate deception allows one to misbehave while pretending to uphold the very highest moral and social standards. Bunburying hence enables two effeminate aesthetes to move at will as Mr. Worthing becomes Ernest in town and Jack in the country whereas Algernon, thanks to his poor invalid friend Bunbury, bunburies all over Shropshire. Adding an extra nuance to the concept of bunburying is an unnamed critic in *Time* who suggests that bunburying "was shorthand for a visit to a fashionable London male whorehouse" (qtd. in Franceschina 1997:265), an opinion reaffirmed by Franceschina in *Homosexualities in the English Theatre: From Lylye to Wilde*, where he states that bunburying came into common usage as same-sex slang after Wilde's 1895 play. Several critics note that as an element of same-sex slang, Bunbury also alludes to a particular genital practice and sex as "burying in the bun" (as stated in Sedgwick 1993:67). The play's repeated reference to it might account for Marquees of Queensberry's[4] plan to discredit Wilde at the opening night of *Earnest* on 14th February 1895. The police, however, were alerted to the possibility of a riot, and hence refused him entrance. In his thirst for revenge, Queensberry appeared four days later at Wilde's Albemarle club and left his calling card saying "For Oscar Wilde posing Somdomite" (qtd. in Franceschina 1997:280). It might seem ironic to think that the marquees of Queensberry (note the elements *queens* and *berry* here, *queens* being an offensive word for a male homosexual and *berry* having the same pronunciation as *-bury* in 'bunbury') eventually led to Oscar Wilde's downfall and subsequent imprisonment. One might consider such a reading as an unusual twist of fate given the fact that it was a man bearing the word 'queen' in his very surname who had set in motion the Wilde trials. Another paradoxical instance lies in the fact that the turmoil created by the three trials helped to inflame a later torch of tolerance of which Wilde could only have dreamt.

The concept of deliberate deception, which is the very essence of bunburying, takes a new turn when both men try to squeeze into the identity of the fascinating heart-throb Ernest in order to woo Miss Fairfax and Miss Cardew. Jack courts Gwendolen as Ernest, while Algernon also tries to pass himself off as Ernest to win the heart of Miss Cardew. Lover's entanglements have inaugurated Ernest as the object of purely heterosexual desire as both Gwendolen and Cecily seem highly susceptible to the physical charms of their admirable beau. Jack and Algie's wish to usurp the identity of the play's mythical suitor, their devotion to the idea of bunburying, powered by the striking resemblance in their dress, speech and mannerisms has led critics to dub Wilde's 1895 play "the most

[4] The Marquees of Queensberry, father of Wilde's young lover Lord Alfred Douglas.

significant piece of gay theatre" (Lieberman, qtd. in Chesebro 1981:166). This view, however, stands in stark contrast to the damning vision of heterosexuality depicted in the play itself. Lady Bracknell's "We live, I regret to say, in an age of surfaces" might just be the line that sets Lieberman's reading into motion. This very line opens a whole new perspective of analysis that allows us to view Jack and Algie, *Earnest's* two flamboyant dandies, in terms of a gay couple. All it takes is a little bit of scratching underneath the "convenient" and conventionally-held heterosexual surface depicted in the play.

Rather than ending with its three heterosexual couples (namely, Algernon and Cecily, Jack and Gwendolen Miss Prism and Dr. Chausible) tying the knot, *Earnest* closes with a scene in which Jack and Algernon turn out to be brothers. What Jack might mean in saying that Algy has "never till today behaved to him like a brother" is, that they have actually shared a very intimate liaison. Instances of the intimate friendship are hinted at in Act two when Merriman informs his master Mr. Worthing that he has taken the liberty of "putting Mr. Ernest's (Algernon posing as Ernest) things in the room next to his" (Jack's). Algernon immediately makes an off-the-cuff comment by saying that he "can't stay more than a week this time" at the Manor House. Not only do the two men sleep in adjacent rooms (most probably connected by one of those secret behind-the-wall doors), but Algernon also seems to be a regular visitor of the Manor House estate. Sedgwick notes that this bond of male attachment is also enhanced by the grammatical effect that the play produces as *Earnest'*s entendre phrases "do nothing but situate in an intimacy of two" (Sedgwick 1993:69):

My dear fellow
Dear Algy
My dear fellow
My dear fellow
My dear fellow
My dear Algy
My dear fellow
My dear fellow
My dear Algy
My dear fellow
Old boy,
My dear young friend
My dear fellow
(*The Importance of Being Earnest* 668-673)

If Jack and Algie are the nineteenth century version of Elton John and David Furnish, where does that leave the women they are so eager to marry? Some critics generally hold the uniting of homosexual code with the androgyny to have had significant resonances in the Victorian homosexual subculture as well as camp behaviour in the twentieth century. The women who inhabit the late-Victorian salon of *The Importance of Being Earnest* seem to embody the fluid quality of gender. They are "creatures of indeterminate sex" (Paglia 1990:536) who use language as a weapon in the process of seeking power and territoriality. By doing so, they challenge the entire body behind the fashionable Victorian notion of "the angel in the house".[5] In performance, both Gwendolen and Cecily seem to

[5] *The Angel in the House* is a poem by Coventry Patmore, first published in 1854 and revised up until 1862. The poem described the perfect Victorian wife: "She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She

escape the conventions of this late-Victorian profile. It is they who use their gift of the gab to manipulate Jack and Algernon into pandering to their every whim, they who with the help of their brilliant and intuitive wit defeat the wits of their passive, eager to procrastinate suitors, and it is they who are bound to wear the trousers in their future marriages. To Jack's question whether she would carry on loving him if his name turned out not to be Ernest, Gwendolen amusingly remarks: "The simplicity of your character makes you exquisitely incomprehensible to me" (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 691). Nothing less skilful is Cecily's manipulation of Algernon during their formal introduction. Wilde lets the incredibly smug Algernon be engaged to a woman of whom he knows practically nothing. Also indicative of the way in which *Earnest*'s women, without a moment's notice, seize control of much of the conversation is the scene in which Jack too lets himself be engaged to Gwendolen. It is by means of her sharp wit that the Wildean androgynous heroine controls her suitor thus dictating the pace of relationship:

> Jack: Gwendolen, we must get married at once. There is no time to be lost.
> Gwendolen: Married, Mr. Worthing?
> Jack: Well…surely. You know that I love you, and you led me to believe, Miss Fairfax, that you were not absolutely indifferent to me.
> Gwendolen: I adore you, but you haven't proposed to me yet. Nothing has been said at all about marriage. The subject has not even been touched on.
> Jack: Well… May I propose to you now?
> Gwendolen: I think it would be an admirable opportunity. And to spare you any possible disappointment, Mr Worthing, I think it only fair to tell you quite frankly beforehand that I am fully determined to accept you.
> (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 676)

The play's supreme dictator, however, is the stern and immoderate character of Lady Bracknell. Her domineering persona governs much of the other characters' actions and identities. That Lord Bracknell, who is "accustomed to being banished upstairs during dinner time" (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 678), is the weaker party in the Bracknell household and hence in the Bracknell marriage, is shown in the situation where it is Lady Bracknell who interviews Jack to find out whether he is eligible or not to marry her only daughter. In doing so, she usurps the role of the father as it was typically a father's task to conduct such interviews.

Interestingly enough, none of *Earnest's* characters seem to succumb to the characteristics generally attributed to his or her social role. Aunt Augusta is the play's *pater familias*, while Jack and Algernon are marionettes whose strings are continually being pulled by the shrewd and sharp-tongued unmarried maidens. This reversal of the masculine/feminine in *Earnest* (with men being weak and women strong) has consequently given birth to a vast plain on which Wilde planted the seeds of his challenge of the late-Victorian sex attitudes.

At first glance, *Earnest's* women seem to enforce the apparently heterosexual character of the play. However, in *The Elementary Structure of Kinship* Levi-Strauss writes

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was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed daily. If there was a chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it ... Above all, she was pure" (Woolf 1966: 2 and 285).

that "the total relationship of exchange which constitutes marriage is not established between a man and a woman, but between two groups of men, and the woman figures only as one of the objects in the exchange, not as one of the partners" (Levi-Strauss 1971:45). The woman is merely a conduit of a relationship in which the true partner is a man. Illustrating such controversial remarks is one of *Earnest's* passages:

> Algernon: Nothing will induce me to part with Bunbury, and if you ever get married, which seems to me extremely problematic, you will be very glad to know Bunbury. A man who marries without knowing Bunbury has a very tedious time of it.
> Jack: That is nonsense. If I marry a charming girl like Gwendolen, and she is the only girl I ever saw in my life that I would marry, I certainly won't want to know Bunbury.
> Algernon: Then your wife will. You don't seem to realise that in married life three is company and two is none.
> (*The Importance of Being Earnest*, pg. 672)

Algernon's account of the marital *ménage-a-trois* (seen as engaging a woman and two men or possibly two women and a man, this latter possibility would treat Bunbury as being a woman) could substantiate Freud's treatment of the erotic triangle as being "symmetrical in the sense that its structure would be relatively unaffected by the power difference that would be introduced by a change in the gender of one of the participants" (Sedgwick 1985:26). If Jack and Algie are indeed a gay couple and if the women in the play are nothing but androgynous creatures, following Strauss and Freud's theories, it might be argued that the primary, if not the only, role of women in *Earnest* is to cement bond of men with men. Had Gwendolen and Cecily not forced their suitors to squeeze into the same identity of the make-believe Ernest, Jack, for one, would have never realised "for the first time in his life the vital importance of being earnest". Wilde's playing on the name of Ernest, powered by Beckson's premise (1974) that the title of the play is not only a pun on the name of Ernest, but also a representation of same-sex love, might grant the reader the possibility to interpret the play's closing line as "I have now realised for the first time in my life the vital importance of being *gay*".

Sedgwick has convincingly argued that Wilde's description of *Love that dare not speak its name* seems to have found its grounding concept in *Earnest's* uncles and aunts. The reader views Aunt Augusta as she usurps the traditionally masculine role of dominating the household. Her actions, speech and mannerisms bear features of a masculine mind. Bartlett (1988) documents that 'aunt', 'auntie' or the French *tante* were recognized throughout the nineteenth century, and are still widely recognized as terms for what an 1889 slang dictionary called a 'passive sodomist' or more likely, for any man who displays a queenly demeanour. Uncle too, assures Bartlett, has been common, as a metonym for the whole range of older men who might form a relation to a younger man (as patron, friend, godfather or adoptive father) thus offering a degree of initiations into gay cultures and identities. Bartlett's assumptions call to mind the scene where Jack tries to talk Algernon into returning his missing cigarette case without acknowledging to him the existence of his young ward miss Cecily Cardew, from whom it was a gift:

Algernon: Yes, but this isn't your cigarette case. This cigarette case is a present from someone of the name Cecily, and you said you didn't know anyone of that name.
Jack: Well, if you want to know, Cecily happens to be my aunt.
Algernon: But why does your aunt call you her uncle? "From little Cecily, with her fondest love to her dear Uncle Jack"
(*The Importance of Being Earnest* 670)

Miss Cecily Cardew, Jack's eighteen-year old ward, is never for a moment persuasively "female". Wilde appears to be more interested in evidencing her oral skills rather than her female attributes. As an eighteen-year old, Cecily has all the joy, hope and glamour of life before her whereas her uncle, Mr.Worthing, according to Miss Prism, is a man "whose gravity of demeanour is especially to be commended in one so comparatively young as he is" (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 684). If uncle is indeed, as Bartlett has argued, a metonym for an elder man (in this case Jack-the-Guardian) who might form a liaison with a younger man (in this case with Cecily who is never for a moment persuasively female), the nature of their relationship seems to replicate Wilde's idea of *Love that dare not speak its name*. Depicted in form of economic sponsorship with a strongly educational function, the relationship between Jack and his young ward Cecily epitomizes same-sex love as evidenced in Dover's *Greek Homosexuality*. Such a reading, together with Bartlett's aunt-centered one, offers a rather insightful degree of initiation into the gay scenario of the play. By acting out the part of a male protector in a sexual relation characterised by age transitivity, Wilde, too, was one of Bartlett's uncles, faithful to the very end in his admiration of *Love that dare not speak its name*.[6]

To the average contemporary media consumer, the very notion and hence epitome of the modern homosexual may be linked to nothing more than the screen image of the flamboyantly witty urban gay icon Jack McFarland of *Will and Grace,* or *Wilma and Grace* as the series is sometimes humorously referred to in popular culture. In the realms of the academia, however, the very name Will of *Will and Grace* is bound to be traced as an allusion to Shakespeare and his waxing lyrical on Willie Hughes, the handsome, effeminate young man to whom the Stratford-upon-Avon lad addresses many passionate sonnets. Or is it the image of the 1950s actor Rock Hudson, smooth in manner and appearance, long in height and Nordic cranial contour that comes to one's mind when speaking of a homosexual prototype? Celebrating same-sex love and the sexual freedom it entails is *Earnest*'s eclectic mix of sexual personae. We have Algernon and Jack, the flamboyantly effeminate dandies, as the forerunners of the Elton John-David Furnish romantic union. Then there are Bartlett's uncles and aunts a.k.a. sugar-daddies. And let us not forget the fact that play's female androgynies may just as easily be Wilde's prototype of today's drag queens. It seems difficult not to bow down before the ingenuous mind of a man who believed that his bounden duty was to push forward and therefore broaden the horizons of people's general beliefs and understandings, particularly in terms of morality and sexual identity. Wilde's unrelentless adherence to this bounden duty is what has essentially made him one of the founding fathers and promoters of the entire body of ideas behind twentieth century sex revolution. The following passage taken from *De Profundis*[7]

[6] Quoted in Bartlett, Neil. *Who Was That Man? A present for Mr. Oscar Wilde*. London: Serpent's Tail, 1988:90.
[7] It is an epistle written by Oscar Wilde during his imprisonment in 1897. The passage is taken from the site: <http://www2.hn.psu.edu/faculty/jmanis/oscar-wilde/De-Profundis.pdf> Web 19 Feb. 2011.

encapsulates to what extent Wilde perceived his role as being symbolic, as being a beacon for the future:

> "I was a man who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age. I had realized this for myself at the very dawn of my manhood, and had forced my age to realise it afterwards. Few men hold such a position in their own lifetime, and have it so acknowledged. It is usually discerned, if discerned at all, by the historian, or the critic, long after both the man and his age have passed away. With me it was different. I felt it myself, and made others feel it."

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KO JE VEĆA ŽENA (MUŠKARAC) U OSKAR VAJLDOVOJ "VAŽNO JE ZVATI SE ERNEST"?

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U ovom radu autorice istražuju karakteristike i ponašanje muških likova u Vajldovoj drami "Važno je zvati se Ernest", i to onih koje ukazuju na njihovu homoseksualnost. Kao kontrast služe ženski likovi u drami koji su prikazani kao aseksualni i androgini, i koji preuzimaju status pater familias-a. Pokušavajući da se pozabavi temom homoseksualnosti i moralnošću, Oskar Vajld je želeo da menja uvrežene društvene stavove i ubeđenja i tako da omogući seksualnu revoluciju koja se ostvarila u dvadesetom veku.

Ključne reči: Vajldovi likovi, ambivalentni muškarci, androgine žene