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Final Thesis

The Importance of Being Earnest on Stage and Screen.

An analysis of the last Oscar Wilde's play.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The Importance of Being Earnest (1895) is one of the most significant comedies written by Oscar Wilde before his downfall. It is a comedy of manners which mocks the world and values of Victorian upper-middle class society, by showing them to be snobbish and dishonest.

The aim of this thesis is to analyze all the elements which are typical of the comic stage. The title is a pun and the main word *Earnest* means serious, but it is a name too. Being Earnest means to be 'A Trivial Comedy for Serious People', as the play's sub-title suggests. The plot is a simple farce which represents at the end who *Earnes*t is and who the specific identity is that Wilde wants to condemn in Victorian society.

My thesis is divided into four chapters. The first is about Oscar Wilde's life, his growth, his experiences as a novelist and in the theatre both as an actor and a director, his love life as well as his decline. The second is about the analysis of his last play on stage, including its main versions, characters and its reception by Victorian society — focusing particularly on the reason why it is the last work Wilde wrote and all consequences. The third chapter is about the differences between *The Importance of*

Being Earnest on stage and screen, with a particular regard to what a cinematographic adaptation is and the analysis of its first faithful screen adaptation directed by Anthony Asquith in 1952— which seems to be the definitive film adaptation of the Wildean play for the screenplay and the production, but also because it gives the spectator the idea of being into a real theatre.

The final chapter is about the role of Wilde in cinema, focusing the attention to another screen adaptation of *The Importance of Being Earnest* directed by Oliver Parker in 2002, which is the most recent one. This adaptation is also completely different from the original play both for the setting and the acts' division— which is absent, as it happens in Asquith's film too— but the peculiarity is given by the overlapping of some scenes and events and the many text's additions and liberties in order to give more than one meaning to the original screenplay.

CHAPTER ONE

1. THE PICTURE OF OSCAR WILDE.

1.1. Life.

Oscar Fingal O' Flahertie Wills Wilde, best known as Oscar Wilde, was born at 21 Westland Row, Dublin, on 16th October 1855. The surname Wilde is Dutch in origin, but the original Irish Wilde was a certain Colonel de Wilde or 'de Vilde'. This soldier offered his services to King William III of England and by dropping the 'de' from his surname, he became more Irish than the Irish. [1] Oscar and Fingal came from Irish legend: the first was the name of the King Oscar I of Sweden, who had been operated of cataract by Oscar's father, Dr.William and the second was the name of a legendary hero in Ossian's poems. O' Flahertie was added in deference to William Wilde's connections with Galway families through his grandmother O'Flynn. [2] Wilde's mother Jane Francesca Elgee, also known as Speranza, expected many extraordinary things of Oscar. He was a child who for some time had been clothed in his mother's dresses and felt himself to be different from the others.

[1] Holland, Vyvyan. *Son of Oscar Wilde* (1954). London: Penguin Books, p.9.
[2]Ellmann, Richard. *Oscar Wilde* (1987). London: Hamish Hamilton, p.16.

Oscar, in fact, rarely spoke of his father and the famous line in his play *The Importance of Being Earnest*: 'All women become like their mothers. That's their tragedy. No man does. That's his', was perhaps his genuine belief. [3] When he was ten, he was sent to Portora Royal School. In 1871, he won a Royal Scholarship in classics at Trinity College In this period he made no friends, apart from his mother Speranza and a professor of Ancient History, the reverend John Pentland Mahaffy. He became like his Professor, a distinguished Greek scholar, a pupil of Trinity College and won the Gold Medal for the best student in the humanities. He remained there for three years, but Trinity had little to offer him and Dublin was far too small a theatre for Oscar who can be seen slowly accumulating the elements of his Oxford behavior, his Pre-Raphaelite sympathies, his dandical dress, his Hellenic bias, his ambiguous sexuality and his contempt for conventional morality[4]. Before going to Oxford, it was necessary to persuade not only Oscar Wilde but also his father because this move would cause his son to break off his dalliance with Catholicism. He went to Magdalen College, in Oxford, which seemed a paradise to him after the general disorder of Dublin.

[3] H.V, *Son of Oscar Wilde,* cit, p.21.
[4]E. R, *Oscar Wilde,* cit. p.32.

1.2. Oxford.

For Irishmen, Oxford is to the mind what Paris is to the body. Wilde had no reason to regard himself as a provincial man who wanted to find in Oxford the great world. He knew many Englishmen that attended his mother's Saturday afternoons and had many relations with people who lived in England, such as Henry S. Bunbury, once at Trinity and now resident in Gloucestershire, who would give his name to the errant behavior of Algernon in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.[5]When Wilde went to Oxford, he was free from complexes, apart from his interest in and admiration for the nobility. Two are the men under whose spell Oscar did fall: John Ruskin and Walter Pater. They had in common a passionate love of beauty— the Middle Ages for the first and the Renaissance for the second. The doctrine they preached was the exaltation of personal experience above all restrictions as 'the ultimate object of life'[6], so the physical sensation is an end in itself. This is the first path of aestheticism. In Magdalen, Wilde lived the life of a normal undergraduate, playing games, drinking a little, cutting lectures and flirting whenever he got the chance.[7] During the course of his years of

[5] Ibid, p.36.
[6] H, V,. *Son of Oscar Wilde*, cit, p.21.
[7] Ibid, p.23.

study, Wilde came near to causing a scandal by taking too much interest in the choir and by leaving about some imprudent letters for anyone to see. The friendship of this pioneer of aestheticism had nothing platonic about them. While at Magdalen University, Oscar became the centre of a small, unconsciously homosexual world, with its dramas, its gossip, and its scandals. The same Oxford became too small for one who wished to be in turn Byron and Goethe. Oscar's last day at Oxford was a triumph.[8]

1.3. Rome and Greece.

Roman Catholicism attracted him more powerfully at Oxford than at Trinity. Ruskin and Pater were also two Catholics rather than Roman Catholics, but they loved, for a question of 'aesthetic charm', visiting Roman Catholic churches, rituals and decorations while treating the dogmas with reserve.[9] In other words, Wilde's faith is proved not only by his interest in the dogmas of the Church but by his pursuit of Aestheticism. In Magdalen he met David Hunter-Blair, and together they went to Rome because he was a Roman Catholic and was determined to convert Oscar. He also went to Greece thanks to Mahaffy. He visited Mycanae and Athens, and this country that was to be the nearest to his

[8]Jullian, Philippe. *Oscar Wilde* (1969). London: Constable London; pp. 43-44.
[9]R.E. *Oscar Wilde* (1987), cit. p.51.

heart. Greece gave him ideas, inspirations for writing poetry and for giving him a new idea of himself. He decided to be the New Plato, to lead generations towards the cult of Beauty.[10] The return to Oxford was delayed by Oscar's very natural desire to break that journey in Rome to join Hunter-Blair. In 1876 Dr. William Wilde had died leaving a very reduced fortune, so he stopped to travel because he didn't have enough money.

1.4. Advances and Marriage.

In the autumn of 1879 Oscar was installed in London. He shared rooms with Frank Miles in Salisbury Street, close to the strand. In this period, the English upper classes were more sensitive to beauty than to wit. The fashionable world, closed in general to the new rich, opened its doors to pretty women as well as to good horsemen and fine shots. After leaving Oxford, he supported himself for six years by writing articles and poems and by lecturing, in England and in America. In 1881 Oscar met Constance Mary Llyod at a young people's party. He fell in love with her at once – her beauty thrilled him from their first meeting. In a letter Oscar described her:

[10]J. P. *Oscar Wilde* (1969). Cit. p.51.

I am going to be married to a beautiful girl called Constance Llyod, a grave, slight, violet-eyed little Artemis, with great coils of heavy brown hair which make her flower-like head droop like a blossom, and wonderful ivory hands which draw music from the piano so sweet that the birds stop singing to listen her.'[11]

After their first meeting, he went to the United States and in France. On his return in 1883, they re-met and he proposed her to marry him. In 1884, when she was 24 years old, they became husband and wife in James' Church, Paddington. Constance seemed almost mute beside her husband. She was intelligent and well-informed. She spoke Italian and French fluently and she also learned German to enjoy reading new books in the language together. Constance's family were opposed to her marriage with Oscar, since he was considered not good enough for her. Their lives followed a strictest conventional code and their marriage, when the Aesthetic period was at its height, was not good for their notoriety. They lived in 16 Tite Street. Oscar's house was to have a great influence as it was a living example of the subject of his lectures. He made his house a 'gathering place' for his guests, a sort of 'saloon' as his mother's drawing-room. Speranza, in fact, wanted to help him to make his house a good enterprise for a great deal of money. Oscar spent money and got into debt. Constance was worried about what happened around

[11] Ibid, p.137.

her, his husband started to find her silence disturbing. He loved her so much, in particular when Cyril and Vyvyan were born. Visitors of the house considered them as ‘a happy family in an elegant house’[12], but something had changed. Oscar was drawing away from his wife, and this happened for two reasons: the aesthete saw with horror the girl’s body deformed by pregnancy and he was bored with a wife who could only bring him love[13]. Constance had no courage to invite anyone to the house. One day Constance asked Oscar to meet some old Dublin friends of hers among whom was a clergyman, a meeting of no interest to him. He was Robert Ross. Constance became jealous of her husband’s good humor when others were present – between them, there were friends that he knew before the marriage and still continued to see. Robert Ross had read Wilde's poems before they met, and was unrestrained by the Victorian prohibition against homosexuality, even to the extent of estranging himself from his family. He was a precocious seventeen-year-old who “so young and yet so knowing, was determined to seduce Wilde"[14]. He could no more have resisted him, in fact he was Oscar’s first lover. The majority of his biographers, because this avowal is so

[12] Ibid, p.154.
[13] Ibid.
[14]R E., *Oscar Wilde* (1987), cit.p.259.

courageous, have never doubted the truth of it.[15] In other words, Wilde, who had longot alluded to Greek love, was "initiated into homosexual sex" by Ross.[16] In 1887, Oscar arrived at a theory: Art for Art' s Sake. He did not invent it, but he made it available for women and young artists without vulgarizing it. It is the usual English rendering of a French slogan from the early 19th century, 'l' Art pour l' Art' – a philosophy by Théophile Gautier in which the intrinsic value of art, and the only "true" art, is divorced from any didactic, moral, or utilitarian function. Like Goethe, Wilde was to speak of Beauty in concrete terms. What he wished for was that Greek or mediaeval thought should be revived with the addition of the acuteness of modern life.[17]Such works are sometimes described as "autotelic", from the Greek that means "complete in itself", a concept that has been expanded to embrace "inner-directed" or "self-motivated" human beings. In other words, Oscar attacked the values of an era which was very sure of itself.[18]

1.5. Lord Alfred.

In mid-1891 Oscar met a youth who had both the beauty and the

[15]J. P. *Oscar Wilde* (1969), cit. p.165.
[16] Mendelsohn, Daniel. "The two Oscar Wildes". How Beautiful It Is and How Easily It Can Be Broken (2008). New York: Harper Collins. p. 218.
[17]J. P., *Oscar Wilde* (1969), cit, p.173.
[18] Ibid, p.174.

rank of his hero. Lionel Johnson, one of Oscar's friends, had for some time spoken of his cousin Lord Alfred Douglas to him. They had met twice, in Winchester and at Oxford, where Warren was the president of Magdalen College. Lord Alfred was very intelligent and one of the most gifted poet. The mixture of the sublime and the ridiculous fascinated Douglas, who at first had been disconcerted by the appearance of the great writer, but who admired him. Alfred or Bosie, who is the nickname used by Oscar, was a member of the Queensberry Family. Wilde and Douglas turned their friendship into something more intimate, and by 1893 after Wilde's infatuation with Douglas, they consorted together regularly in a tempestuous affair. Johnson later repudiated Wilde in "The Destroyer of a Soul" (1892), deeply regretting initiating what became the highly scandalous love affair between the two men. It began with the words 'I hate you with a necessary hate'.[19] In 1895, *The Importance of Being Earnest, A Trivial Comedy for Serious People* was first performed at the St James's Theatre in London. This was the last Oscar's play, and he again returns to the theme of switched identities. It is a farcical comedy and, for that reason, all protagonists maintain fictitious personæ

[19] Ibid, p. 233.

to escape burdensome social obligations of Victorian society.[20] *Earnest* is lighter in in comparison to Wilde's earlier comedies. The opening night was a success and characterized both the climax of Wilde's career and his downfall. The Marques of Queensberry, Lord Alfred Douglas' father, planned to present the writer with a bouquet of rotten vegetables and disrupt the show. Wilde was called in a tip and Queensberry was refused admission. Their enmity came to the revelation of Wilde's homosexuality to the Victorian public and he was sentenced to imprisonment. Ellman said that "*The Importance of Being Earnest* touched on many themes Wilde had been building since the 1880s —the languor of aesthetic poses was well established and Wilde takes it as a starting point for the two protagonists".[21] Wilde told Robert Ross that the play's theme was "That we should treat all trivial things in life very seriously, and all serious things of life with a sincere and studied triviality."[22] The theme is hinted at in the play's ironic title, and "earnestness" is repeatedly alluded to in the dialogue. Algernon says in Act II, "one has to be serious about something if one is to have any amusement in life" but goes on to

[20] D, M. The two Oscar Wildes, cit, Volume 49, Number 15, 10 October 2002.
[21] R, E. *Oscar Wilde* (1987), cit, p.398.
[22] Ibid.

reproach Jack for 'being serious about everything"[23] In *Earnest* the protagonists' duplicity (Algernon's "bunburying" and Worthing's double life as Jack and Ernest in the town and country)[24] is undertaken for more innocent purposes — largely to avoid unwelcome social obligations.[25] While much theatre of the time tackled serious social and political issues, *Earnest* is superficially about nothing at all. It 'refuses to play the game'.

1.6. Prison.

Oscar Wilde was incarcerated for his homosexuality from 25 May 1895 to 18 May 1897. Wilde had precipitated himself towards disaster. His prison was like an unsuccessful suicide, with all the vomiting and all the humiliation that a body can give when it is no longer wanted. Two years would pass, grey, dirty, interminable.[26] He changed prisons many times. He went to Newgate Prison in London for a week for processing, then was moved to Pentonville Prison, where the "hard labour" to which he had been sentenced consisted of many hours of walking a treadmill[148] and picking oakum (separating the fibres in scraps of old

[23]Pablé, Adrian, *The Importance of Renaming Ernest? Italian Translations of Oscar Wilde*(2005), p.302.
[24] D. M. The two Oscar Wildes. cit, Volume 49, Number 15, 10 October 2002.
[25] R.E. *Oscar Wilde* (1987), cit; p.398
[26] P.J. *Oscar Wilde* (1969), cit; p.339.

navy ropes), and where prisoners were allowed to read only the Bible and *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Prisoners were not allowed to speak to each other. A few months later he was moved to Wandsworth Prison in London. In November he collapsed during chapel from illness and hunger. His right ear drum was ruptured in the fall, an injury that later contributed to his death.[27] He spent two months in the infirmary. He was transferred in November to Reading Goal. The transfer itself was the lowest point of his incarceration, as a crowd jeered and spat at him on the railway platform.[28] He spent the remainder of his sentence there. Between January and March 1897 Wilde wrote a 50,000-word letter to Douglas. He was not allowed to send it but was permitted to take it with him when released from prison. Wilde was released from prison on 18 May 1897 and sailed immediately for France. He never returned to the UK.

1.7. Decline.

Although Wilde's health had suffered greatly from the harshness and diet of prison, he had a feeling of spiritual renewal. He spent his last three years in impoverished exile. He changed his name "Sebastian

[27]R.E. *Oscar Wilde* (1987), cit, p.465.
[28] Ibid.

Melmoth", after Saint Sebastian, which is the name of the main character of Melmoth the Wandered (a Gothic novel by Charles Maturin, Wilde's great-uncle). In mid-1897 Wilde was with Robert Ross in the seaside village of Berneval-le-Grand in northern France. Douglas had been the cause of his misfortunes, but he and Wilde were reunited in August 1897 at Rouen. Both their friends and families disapproved this meeting. Constance Wilde was already refusing to meet Wilde or allow him to see their sons, though she sent him money – a meagre three pounds a week. During the latter part of 1897, Wilde and Douglas lived together near Naples for few months until, they were separated by their families under the threat of cutting off all funds. His poverty led him to correct and re-publish *The Importance of Being Earnest*. He was "very much in command of himself and of the play", but he refused to write anything else: "I can write, but have lost the joy of writing".[29] In November 1900 Wilde discovered to be affected by cerebral meningitis. The 29 November Robbie Ross arrived and sent for a priest, and Wilde was conditionally baptized into the Catholic Church by Fr Cuthbert Dunne, a Passionist priest from Dublin.

[29] Ibid, p.527.

Wilde died on 30 November 1900. The cause of the disease was meningitis or maybe syphilis[30].

[30] Ibid, p.582.

CHAPTER TWO

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST.

2.1. The Play.

Jack Worthing is an influent man in Hertfordshire – he is a major landowner and an employer of a great number of citizens — who pretends for years to have a brother named Ernest whose name frequently needs him to rush to his help due to the problems caused by his own scandalous lifestyle. The play begins in Algernon Moncrieff's flat in West London, with a dialogue between Algy and Ernest. This name is, in fact, an alibi which allows Jack to disappear from time to time and do whatever he pleases. Nobody knows that Ernest is the name by which Jack is known when he is London, where he probably goes in order to lead the kind of scandalous life of which he claims to disapprove. Jack is in love with his best friend's cousin Gwendolen Fairfax. At the beginning of act I, Jack tells Algernon that he wants to propose to Gwendolen, but his friend insists to know why there is the inscription "Uncle Jack" from "little Cecily" inside his cigarette case. Algernon believes that he may have a double life as himself has — when he wants

to escape any tedious engagement, he has a chronic invalid friend named Bunbury. Algernon, suspicious of that, asks Jack who are the people mentioned in his cigarette case and Jack confesses that is not Ernest and that Cecily is an eighteen-year-older lady under his protection. Cecily Cardew is, in fact, the granddaughter of the late Thomas Cardew, who adopted Jack when he was a baby after finding him in a bag at Victoria Station. Jack also tells Algernon that, since Cecily is interested in him, he wishes to "kill" the imaginary brother that he pretends to have, yet he describes Cecily in such a way that Algernon becomes even more curious about her. When Gwendolen and her mother Lady Bracknell arrive, Jack, thanks to Algy, propose himself to Gwendolen. Despite being happy to learn that the feeling is mutual, Jack is astounded to discover that Gwendolen wants to marry him only because of his name – according to her, Ernest "inspires absolute confidence."[31] Gwendolen even says that she would not like to marry a man whose name is Jack, because "there is very little music in the name Jack […] It produces absolutely no vibrations [...] The only really safe name is Ernest."[32] While questioning Jack about his family background, Lady Bracknell is

[31] Wilde, Oscar. *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1980). Edited by Russell Jackson. New York: W.W. Norton and Company Inc; p.62.
[32] Ibid, p. 64.

astonished to learn that Jack was found in a handbag at Victoria Station and then adopted by Thomas Cardew and she decides to forbid him to marry her daughter.

In Act II, Algernon visits Jack's country house using Jack's alibi of his brother Ernest, thus enraging Jack, who has told that Ernest has suddenly died in Paris. Algernon, having fallen in love with Cecily, asks her to marry him. Although he is happy to learn that she already considers herself to be engaged to him, he is disappointed by the discovery that her interest and fascination in him partly derives from the name Ernest – as happens for Gwendolen and the "confidence"[33] that this name inspires. Algernon is searching the local rector Dr. Chasuble because he wants to be christened Ernest. Meanwhile, Gwendolen arrives in the garden in order to surprise Jack but there, Cecily orders a cup of tea and tries to play hostess. Cecily doesn't know how Gwendolen figures in Jack's life, and Gwendolen, for her part, doesn't know who Cecily is. Gwendolen initially thinks Cecily is a visitor to the Manor House but she is shocked to know that the young lady is "Mr. Worthing's ward". Ernest, in fact, has never mentioned having a ward, and Cecily explains that Ernest Worthing is not her guardian but Jack, and that she is engaged to Ernest

[33] Ibid, p. 128.

Worthing. Gwendolen affirms that this is impossible because she is engaged to Ernest. The tea party leads to a war of good manners. When Jack and Algernon arrive, the climate is not the best, but both of them, thanks to the help of Dr. Chasuble, decide to be christened Ernest. The young ladies understand that they have been deceived, so Cecily informs Gwendolen that her Ernest is really named Jack and Gwendolen informs Cecily that hers is really called Algernon. The two women want to know where Ernest is, because both are engaged to be married to the same person. Jack, finally, admits that he has no brother and that Ernest is a fake. Both women are bewildered and furious, and go away together arm in arm.

In Act III, the two couples are together in the drawing's room of the Manor House. Gwendolen and Cecily ask their respective partners for an explanation, but they completely forgive the men when they are informed that both men will be christened Ernest. Soon after, Lady Bracknell arrives, after having followed Gwendolen from London. She demands to know what has happened and asks Algernon if this is the house where his invalid friend Mr. Bunbury resides. Gwendolen says Lady Bracknell of her engagement to Jack but Aunt Augusta declares that a union between them is out of the question. Algernon answers to

Lady Bracknell saying that Mr. Bunbury does not live there and that he is somewhere now because he is dead. Moreover, Algy takes advantage of the situation to inform her about his engagement to Cecily, and to inspect something about her person and social connections. Lady Bracknell infuriates Jack. He replies to all her questions with sarcasm. The last possible information that Jack gives to Lady Bracknell, is that Cecily has a worth approximately 130.000 in the funds and stands to inherit more than she already has when she comes of age. At this point, Lady Bracknell becomes genuinely interested. Jack informs her that he is Cecily's legal guardian and so he refuses to give his consent to her union with Algernon. Lady Bracknell suggests that the two-young people simply wait until Cecily comes of age, and Jack points out that until she is thirty-five under she does not legally come of age as her grandfather's will said. Lady Bracknell asks Jack to reconsider Algernon proposal and he points out that the matter is entirely in her own hands. In this exactly moment, Jack suggests to Aunt Augusta that as soon as she consents to his marriage to Gwendolen, Cecily can have his consent to marry Algernon. However, Lady Bracknell refuses to consider it.

When she and Gwendolen are about to leave, Dr. Chasuble mentions

Cecily's governess, Miss Prism. When the governess arrives, Lady Bracknell seems to know her and a moment later, she accuses her that twenty-eight years before, she left her sister's house with a baby and now she pretends to know where the baby is because she never returned. Miss Prism doesn't know where he was because she placed him in a handbag with the manuscript of a three-volume novel that she had written. Jack asks Miss Prism what happened to the bag and she replies that it is, "in the cloakroom of a railway station". Jack presses her for having more details and goes quickly offstage. He arrives few moments later with a large handbag and asks Miss Prism if it was hers. She confirms that. Jack believes to have found her mother and throws himself on her calling her "Mother!". But Miss Prism has not children and Jack is discovered to be the legitimate child of Lady Bracknell's sister, so Algernon's mother and for this reason he is Algy's older brother. Indeed, Jack's originally christened name is "Ernest John." At this point, he discovered that in all these years Ernest is his first name, as is Jack. At the end, both couples and Miss Prism and Dr. Chasuble embrace, and Jack finally knows "the vital Importance of Being Earnest." (ACT III, p.92)

2.2. The Genesis of the comedy.

First of all, Wilde was influenced by the Restoration Comedy for its witty dialogue, while he marked an important step in the theatre of the Absurd for the theme of the double life and identity. The play works on different levels. It is full of misunderstandings and it ridicules the conventions of Victorian melodrama. This is the reason why Wilde wants to destroy the Victorian's labels on love, family and education. *The Importance of Being Earnest* can be read as a social satire on the value placed on appearances in a conventional nineteenth-century farce. In it, Wilde makes his people 'real' and then took his audiences through the looking-glass into a world which seemed to reflect modern life, but which was a surreal improvisation upon it.[34] This play is widely regarded as Wilde's supreme achievement in drama and his most accomplished piece of work. Peter Raby claims that "he has found a perfect dramatic form for his own uneasy relation to society success and originality do not make it easier to discuss."[35] Its action has been removed from reality to the comic world, where the improbable always happens. The play has an 'ethical scheme'. As with Wilde's previous plays, most of the basic

[34] Raby Peter, "Wilde's comedy society" in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde* (1997). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 159.
[35] Raby, Peter. *Oscar Wilde*: *British and Irish Authors* (1988). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 120.

ingredients of the plot are familiar engagements, false identities, overbearing mothers and they are all clichés of the comic stage.[36] All farce contains an element of anarchy: the word **'**Earnest**'**, for example. 'Earnest' is an adjective which means **'**serious**'**, but it is also the name **'**Ernest**'**. Some describe the play as quintessential farce, perfect dramatic nonsense.[37] Being Earnest is a "A Trivial Comedy for Serious People" as the sub-title suggests, with particular regard to the play's essential fragility. Jack and his friend Algy have a double life. Jack lives in Hertfordshire, but when he goes to London he is known as Earnest, to protect his reputation. His pupil, Cecily thinks that Earnest is his brother. In London, where he is known as Earnest, Jack falls in love with Gwendolen. Algy, too, invented an imaginary friend – Mr. Bunbury. In the country, Algy falls in love with Cecily, who thinks that he is Jack's brother Ernest. At the end of the play, it is possible to see that Jack and Algy are brothers, and that Jack's real name is Ernest. An important element in the play, is the fact that both ladies – Gwendolen and Cecily – are not in love with Algy and Jack**,** but they are in love with the name **'**Ernest**'**. Peter Raby, in his essay, says that someone whose name is

[36] Eltis, Sos. *Revising Wilde: Society and Subversion in the Plays of Oscar Wilde* (1996). New York: Oxford University Press, p.172.
[37] Ibid.

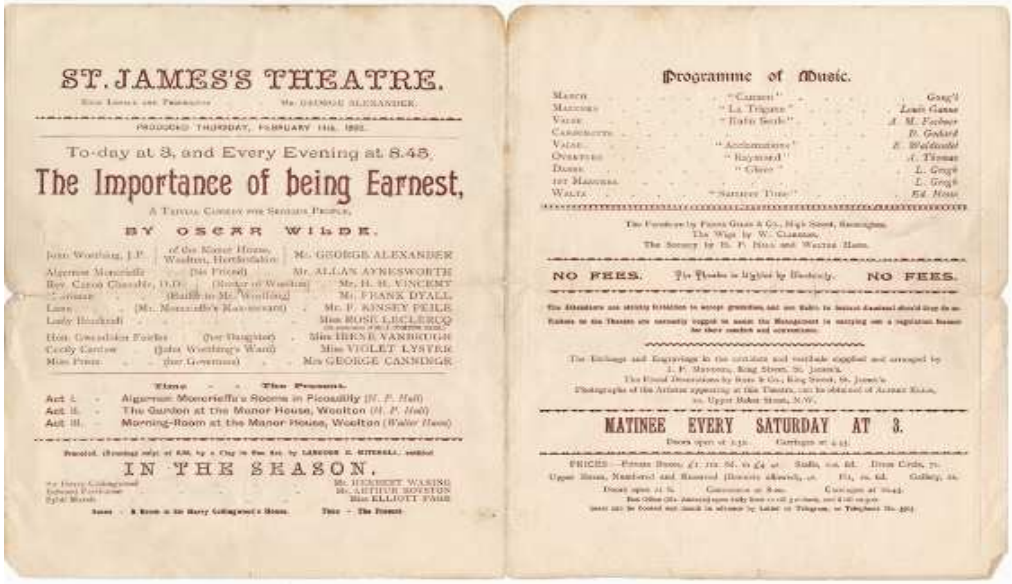
Ernest is ironic. The identification of Ernest-ness with the cant and hypocrisy of Victorian life is underlined by Samuel Butler's choice of the name Ernest Pontifex for his hero in *The Way of All Flesh*, which was a rigorous in its condemnation of Victorian family life and its twin pillars of religion and education.[38]

Another important aspect regarding Wilde is the clash between manners and morals, between style and content and between the author and his characters. The greatest problem which he faced, as a dramatist, was that of finding a world fit for the dandy to live in. But before that, it is necessary to know who the dandy really is. The dandy is defined by his alienation from the social world in which he lives. His best audience is himself, – his favorite view is himself through the looking glass. He is a displaced person, but this displacement is voluntary.[39] The dandy requires a special form of play for his embodiment: the drama. The dramatic role of the dandy would seem to lead into an amoral, inconsequential and superficial world. Oscar's aim is to create a figure and a world for himself. This was the real problem. He solved it in his last play. He tried to find a "solution", and this enables one to understand

[38] P.R., *Oscar Wilde*: *British and Irish Authors*, cit. p. 121.
[39] Gregor, Ian. "Comedy and Oscar Wilde" in *The Sewanee Review (*1966). The John Hopkins University Press, pp. 501-502. Available on <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27541430>

more clearly the nature of Wilde's single dramatic masterpiece.

2.3. First Publication.



ST. JAMES'S THEATRE.

To-day at 3, and Every Evening at 8.45.

The Importance of being Earnest,

A TRIVIAL COMEDY FOR SERIOUS PEOPLE,

BY OSCAR WILDE.

John Worthing, J.P.	of the Manor House, Woolton, Hertfordshire	Mr. GEORGE ALEXANDER
Algernon Moncrieff	(his Friend)	Mr. ALLAN AYNESWORTH
Rev. Canon Chasuble, D.D.	(Rector of Woolton)	Mr. H. H. VINCENT
Merriman	(Butler to Mr. Worthing)	Mr. FRANK DYALL
Lane	(Mr. Moncrieff's Man-servant)	Mr. P. KINSEY PEILE
Lady Bracknell		Miss ROSE LECLERCQ
Hon. Gwendolen Fairfax	(her Daughter)	Miss IRENE VANBRUGH
Cecily Cardew	(John Worthing's Ward)	Miss VIOLET LYSTER
Miss Prism	(her Governess)	Mrs GEORGE CANNINGE

Time - The Present.

Act I. - Algernon Moncrieff's Rooms in Piccadilly (*H. P. Hall*)
Act II. - The Garden at the Manor House, Woolton (*H. P. Hall*)
Act III. - Morning-Room at the Manor House, Woolton (*Walter Hann*)

IN THE SEASON.

Mr. HERBERT WASING
Mr. ARTHUR ROYSTON
Miss ELLIOTT FAIR

Programme of Music.

March	"Carmen"	Gung'l
Mazurka	"La Trigana"	Louis Ganne
Valse	"Bahn Seele"	A. M. Fischer
Cavatina		B. Godard
Valse	"Acclamations"	E. Waldteufel
Overture	"Raymond"	A. Thomas
Dance	"Glove"	L. Gregh
1st Mazurka		L. Gregh
Waltz	"Sabine Time"	Ed. Haus

NO FEES. NO FEES.

MATINEE EVERY SATURDAY AT 3.

Oscar Wilde's most famous and successful play *The Importance of Being Earnest* was not written in a light-hearted atmosphere, in fact he had many financial difficulties.[40]

> I am in a very much worse state for money that I told you. But am just finishing a new play which, as it is quite nonsensical and has no serious interest, will I hope bring me in a lot of red gold.[41]
>
> (Letters, 364)

[40] Bird, Alan. The play of Oscar Wilde (1977). London;Clarke, Doble & Brendon Ltd Plymounth and London, p.161
[41] Rupert Hart-Davis, *The Letters of Oscar Wilde* (August 1894), London, Editorial Matter, p.364

The play was finished within three weeks and was first submitted to George Alexander**,** a rising theatrical star, who was hesitant about producing the play. In 1891 he had taken the St James's Theatre, where he remained until his death in 1915. The first version of the play was immensely long, filling four exercise books with farcical accidents, broad puns, and several familiar comic devices. It was in fact reshaped in successive drafts, and Wilde continued to revise the play long after it had been performed, devoting much time to editing and proof-reading to perfect the final published version of 1899. The existence of earlier versions of *Earnest* is more generally acknowledged than is the case with his earlier plays. Primarily it is known that Wilde complied with a request from George Alexander to reduce the play from four acts to three.[42] This is the best-known and most radical alteration made between the first draft and the first night, but Wilde had revised every sequence, most speeches and almost every sentence over the past six months.[43] Conventional comic turns, unfunny witticisms and genuine nonsense were cut. The main target is Lady Bracknell who is the embodiment of conventional upper-class Victorian respectability. She develops through

[42] Eltis, Sos. *Revising Wilde: Society and Subversion in the Plays of Oscar Wilde*, cit. pp.175-176.
[43] Russel Jackson, "The Importance of Being Earnest" in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, cit, p. 163.

successive drafts from the familiar overbearing duchess into a quirkier and more disturbing character.[44] Moreover, Wilde's revisions produced more radical and unconventional roles for *Earnest*'s female characters, transforming them into stronger and more original individuals. Gwendolen, for example, is often reduced to a comic caricature. She, firstly is a less dignified figure, but she is also a more disagreeable one. In the final version**,** Jack says that she might become like her mother in about 150 years. Gwendolen becomes the sophisticated and fashionable woman of the town, while Cecily is the country girl with both innocence and self-possession of the experienced woman-about town.[45] The final solution is that men should never try to dictate to women. Wilde's revisions also edited out the note of cynicism which marked the earlier versions and introduced instead the carefree optimism and charm which characterize the final version.[46] The first *Earnest*, in fact, has much in common with the cynical world of *Engaged*. The marriage is considered both the lovers' incarnation of romantic dreams, but also as the mundane conclusion of a far more pleasant flirtation—it is a marriage with world-weary cynicism. Algernon, in the final version, says:

> It is very romantic to be in love. But there is nothing romantic about a

[44] Eltis, Sos. *Revising Wilde: Society and Subversion in the Plays of Oscar Wilde*, cit. p.177.
[45] Ibid,, p.184.
[46] Ibid, p.189.

definitive proposal. (ACT I,p.40)

The Importance of Being Earnest is a play written by "a butterfly for butterflies". It opened at the St James's Theatre on 14 February 1895. The Valentine's night was a glittering occasion, with audiences in evening wear. Wilde himself was in attendance, wearing what one biographer called 'the depth of fashion'. The production was a huge success. Allan Aynesworth, who played Algernon Moncrieff**,** said 'In my fifteenth yeas of acting, I never remembered a greater triumph than the first night of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The audience rose in their seats and cheered and cheered again'.[47] Alexander was one of the last great actor-managers, and the original 'Jack John Worthing'.

The first and complete cast was made up by:

- Jack John Worthing — George Alexander
- Algernon Moncrieff — Allan Aynesworth
- Rev. Canon Chasuble —H. H. Vincent
- Merriman — Frank Dyall
- Lane — F. Kinsey Peile
- Lady Bracknell — Rose Leclercq
- Gwendolen Fairfax — Irene Vanbrugh

[47] H. Montgomery Hyde, Introduction to *Wilde: The Complete Plays* (1988), London, Methuen, p.13

- Cecily Cardew — Evelyn Millard
- Miss Prism — Mrs. George Canninge

Thanks to this work of art, Wilde created the image of an artist who worked by inspiration and 'sprezzatura', composing almost in spite of himself. He was a master of what would now be called "media opportunities". Wilde made great his play with the boundary between public and private personality, affecting a kind of lofty intimacy with tantalized journalists and their public. Such a 'personality' was in one sense a godsend to Alexander, but some believed that Wilde used 'impertinence' to describe himself and his style. *The importance of Being Earnest* was one of the few plays from its period to remain in theatrical repertoires[48].

When Wilde wrote his play, he had a relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas who was much younger than him. Their passionate love was a scandal for Victorian society. Bosie, who was the lovely nickname of Alfred, was a frivolous boy, spoiled, with a rather unmanageable character and a great love for money. It was however a very tormented love— homosexuality was a serious crime and Wilde lover's personality made their relationship even more complicated by itself. Nevertheless,

[48] A. Bird, The play of Oscar Wilde,cit. p. 164-165.

the father of Alfred, the Marquis of Queensberry, a nobleman with a dull mentality in line with that of the epoch, discovered soon the bond among the two and decided to defend his child from any possible charges.

In 1895, while the writer was in a club, he received a letter containing offenses, among which that of sodomy. This has happened both for the mental closer of the Marquis and also for his ignorance. After that, Wilde tried to engage a lawyer to sue his "father-in-law." The Marquis of Queensberry, having much money than him, secretly followed him and picked up various proofs about his sexual orientation. This is the reason why Wilde was avoiding the Marquis — in fact he asked R.V. Shone, the business manager of the St. James Theatre**,** to write to Queensberry saying that the seat given to him on the opening night had already been taken and giving him back the money. Queensberry presented himself at the theatre with a bouquet of carrots and turnips that he wanted to throw at Oscar at the end of the play. This is the reason why, when Wilde was called for, he refused to take a bow. Wilde had issued a libel charge to the Marquess because he had implied that he was conducting an illicit relationship with his son.

At the time, homosexuality was regarded a serious criminal offence (see image below).

The program changes from some time after the first night— after Oscar's trial, the manager of the St James's, removed the author's name from the program, ashamed of the connection, but not too ashamed to keep making money out of it for himself and Wilde's family. *The Importance of Being Earnest* was not the culmination, and of course not at all the conclusion, of a dramatic career. Wilde declared that he was unsuitable for the more serious repertoire the manager was establishing

for the St. James's company, and he wished to take with him on a projected American tour.[49] The play in Broadway opened at the Empire Theatre on 22nd April 1895, but closed after only sixteen performances. Its cast included William Faversham as Algy, Henry Miller as Jack, Viola Allen as Gwendolen, and Ida Vernon as Lady Bracknell. There also was an Australian premiere, in Melbourne, on 10th August 1895, presented by Dion Boucicault, Jr. and Robert Brough, and the play was an immediate success. Wilde's downfall in England did not affect the popularity of his plays in Australia.

2.4. Society and Marriage.

The Importance of Being Earnest was influenced by Victorian society, education, lifestyle and developments. Thanks to Queen Victoria, London became one of the greatest cities all over the world, not only for the population growth, but also for the new technologies such as horse-drawn tram, train above and underground, new buildings and new single-family houses. The middle class was the majority of the people in the city and it was also considered as the new bourgeoisie. Men and women had two different roles: the former communed to work and they worked

[49] Ibid, p. 165.

in offices, while the latter had no work because they were responsible for the education of their children – of their sons, until they went away to school, and of their daughters until they married. All Victorian women had to be good wives. Oscar Wilde, in fact, perceived that something new had happened to marriage as the result of the population explosion of London and the accompanying changes in the way people lived and worked.

Lane's views on marriage seem somewhat lax. Really, if the lower orders don't set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them? They seem, as a class, to have absolutely no sense of moral responsibility.[50]

The men left the house early and arrived home late without knowing what wives did during the day, while women needed their husbands to be earnest, to be true and loyal because in many ways they were strangers.[51]

In *The Importance of Being Earnest,* someone must be earnest but someone else does not have to. Algernon Moncrieff, one of the main characters of the play, is not earnest. He has a secret life, he has no money and he is not a responsible man. He is a dedicated Bunburyist, as was Oscar Wilde. Camille Paglia says that "Jack Worthing and Algernon

[50] Ibid, p.161

[51] Sale, Roger. "Being Earnest" in *The Hudson Review* (2003), Vol. 56, No. 3 pp. 476; available on <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3852689?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents>>

Moncrieff, idle gentlemen of the town, are androgynes of manners".[52] This means that between them, Jack cannot enjoy even the threat of an idle moment, and Algernon in his own way, is busy all the time, playing the piano, eating cucumber sandwiches, accommodating his aunt as much as he can, and Bunburying whenever possible.[53] In this play**,** Algernon is like Jack. Algy accuses Jack to be a Bunburyist, but Jack loathes the idea. He flirts with Gwendolen and he is in town only to propose to her. The first funny moment occurs when Jack is trapped in the affair of the cigarette case, in the fact that his taking a high moral line with Cecily's education has forced him to invent his wayward brother, but if Gwendolen accepts him he will kill Ernest Worthing first. He is Earnest about being Ernest.[54] As for marriage, Gwendolen will marry for love, while her mother Lady Bracknell will choose a man according to her criteria, that is to say a man who does not contrast with her social class. Algy has no doubt that 'All women became like their mothers' (ACT I, p.78) and this was typical in Victorian society. As Robert Sage argues in his essay, in Act I, Algernon's speeches are all jokes, while those of Jack and Lady Bracknell are real because the first is earnest and

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[52] Camille Paglia, "The English Epicene" in *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (1990), London & New Haven, p. 531.
[53] S. R. "Being Earnest" in *The Hudson Review*, cit; p. 476.
[54] Ibid, p. 478.

the second believes that everything is reason of outrage.[55] At this point, it is also important to say that Wilde wanted a sort of competition between men and women. All women did not depend on their both loving and nonexistent man, trying to be both a kind of new women, secure in herselves and to be prickly when finding such a quality in another woman.

In Act II, Cecily and Gwendolen are in contrast with each other because both are trying to receive Ernest's proposal first.

Cecily: This is no time for wearing the shallow mask of manners. When I see a spade I call it a spade.

Gwendolen: I am glad to say that I have never seen a spade. It is obvious that our social spheres have been widely different. (ACT II, p.138)

Another important point is the fact that Gwendolen wants an earnest man and gets one, while Cecily wants an Ernest man in name and gets one. Jack and Algy had two different ideas about the concept of marriage. It is not accident that Jack wanted to marry Gwendolen because he believes in stability and in a religious conception of it. This proposal, in this way, becomes a sort of excuse for Algy, the main excuse to talk about that and to show his opposition to this Victorian convention.

[55] S. R. "Being Earnest" in *The Hudson Review*, cit, p. 476.

Algernon: In the first place, girls never marry the men they flirt with (ACT I, p. 52)

or

Algernon: The amount of women in London who flirt with their own husbands is perfectly scandalous (ACT I, p. 52)

Another example that destroys the utopian idea of marriage and perfect love, is when Algy talks about adultery as it was the normality for men during Victorianism.

Algernon: You don't seem to realise, that in married life three is company and two is none. (ACT I, p.52)

Wilde's first technique is to spoof the timeless romantic fictions of love's inception, in fact, the myth of love at first sight undergoes a kind of super parody. Cecily, for example, loves Algernon in her "diary". Cecily decides to love him or not; to re-love him and to break their engagement whenever she wants. Gwendolen's love for Jack is sympathy itself. It is the old romantic idea of spiritual love based on simplicity and Platonic sensibility.[56]

Gwendolen: The story of your romantic origin, as related to me by mamma, with unpleasing comments, has naturally stirred the deeper fibers of my nature. Your Christian name has an irresistible fascination. The simplicity of your character

[56] Richard Forest, "Wilde as Parodist: A Second Look at the Importance of Being Earnest" in *College English* (1956), vol.18, pag.20. available on << https://www.jstor.org/stable/372764 >>

makes you exquisitely comprehensible to me. (ACT I, p.84).

Wilde reinforces his parody of the beautiful innocence of love at first sight and the spiritual impregnability of Platonic love by short-circuiting what our expectations would be if this were either the usual romantic melodrama or a real comedy of manners. In *Earnest* the love breach occurs when Gwendolen and Cecily discover that their Earnests are impostors. The restoration of love is made possible only when Jack and Algernon declare themselves ready to face the horrors of christening. The situation is so patently ludicrous, and the sentiments expressed by the two girls are at once so absurdly didactic and melodramatic at the same time: a real satire of manners.[57] The moral of Wilde's parody: the rake is a fake, girlish innocence is the bait of a monstrous mantrap, the wages of sin is matrimony.[58]

2.5. Satiric Strategy.

The *Importance of Being Earnest* is a trivial play for serious people, but the fun is a turning point. It merits attentions both as a satire and both as a drama because some critics believe that it could be considered only good for fun and not as a good play. The farce is

[57] R.F, "Wilde as Parodist: A Second Look at the Importance of Being Earnest" in *College English* cit; p.21.
[58] Ibid, p.21.

meaningful. Tone and plot have been success-fully integrated, and the whole is more truly comic. Awareness of its satirical strategy precludes an analysis for lack of any kind of rationale.[59] For the first time in his plays, Wilde puts the fine art of epigram to serious purposes: it participates in the total meaning of the play. *Earnest* has no hero or heroine as happened in his previous plays. The characters never stop to be flippant and this corresponds to their real nature. The only ironist is Wilde himself. His farce, in fact, corresponds to the problem of the 'Self in Writing'[60] abandoning the simple ethics of thesis melodrama and sacrificing the illusionistic conventions of naturalism, showing in this way human life as comic.

The play's merit is that it is all farce, capable of serving as a lucid image of the non-farcical reality that is kept strictly outside the play. Wilde has respected his paradoxes. Otto Reinert says that the emotional neutrality of two couples as figures of farce allows Wilde's characters to establish his "limited perspective": Wilde's basic formula for satire is their assumption of a code of behaviour that represents the reality that

[59] Otto, Reinert. "Satiric Strategy in the Importance of Being Earnest" in *College English* (1956), Vol. 18, No. 1 p. 14; available on << https://www.jstor.org/stable/372763 >>

[60] Joel,Fineman. "The Significance of Literature: The Importance of Being Earnest", in *The MIT Press* (1980), Vol. 15 p. 79; available on <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/778454>>

Victorian conventions pretends to ignore.[61] Algernon is one of the characters that is shocked to convention. Wilde, in fact, puts his attention on the Bunburying Algernon, who was always escaping the hypocrisy of convention, becoming himself a hypocrite by pretending to be someone he is not. Only Jack and Lady Bracknell seem to be outside the pattern of inversion, but their conventionality is not genuine at all. Maybe, Jack is a confirmed Bunburyist, long before Algernon explained the term to him. An important turning point is when the pattern of inversion operates; in fact, the characters either express or assume a morality that is deduced from the actual behavior of high society, though the existence of conventional morality is sometimes recognized as a fact to come to terms with.[62] Wilde's view of the ludicrous and sinister realities behind the fashionable façade of an over civilized society where nothing serious is considered serious and nothing trivial. But before being a play, *Earnest* is an imitation of action, and no discussion of tone apart from its dramatic setting can account for the extraordinary impact of the play as a play.[63] Action is an important element in every theatrical play because it habitually informs the satiric dialogue with a coherent meaning. In the

[61] O. R. "Satiric Strategy in the Importance of Being Earnest" in *College English*,cit, p.15
[62] Ibid, p.16
[63] Ibid, p.17

Importance of Being Earnest, the action itself corresponds to the action of being earnest. The title is the statement of this theme, in fact it deals with the consequences of not being earnest that Algernon calls Bunburying, and it is this Bunburying itself that gives the plot moral significance to the entire plot. There are not only actions around the characters, but also other fundamental aspects, such as dialogue. It is everywhere an exercise of wit a subtler comic effect than farce can comfortably take very much time for.[64]

The trivial comedy, as the subtitle suggests, is connected to the Bunburying, because it gives the idea of the trivial nature, inventing a fictitious character, who can serve as a pretext for escaping a frustrating social routine, regulated by repressive conventions. The pretended reason for getting away is perfectly respectable, even commendable, according to convention: to comfort a dying friend, to rescue a fallen brother.[65] In the play there are two types of Bunburying, one that corresponds to the fun and the other one to the Bunburyist, but in the wider sense—he is serious about not being serious. Bunburyism is the alternative to a convention that fails to reckon with the facts of human

[64] R.F. "Wilde as Parodist: A Second Look at the Importance of Being Earnest" in *College English,* cit. p.19

[65] O. R. "Satiric Strategy in the Importance of Being Earnest" in *College English*, cit, p.17.

nature.[66] The escape from convention is itself a flagrant instance of hypocrisy that is, at the same time, the price the Bunburyist pays. In his title pun, Wilde catches the moral failure of Dandyism. Jack and Algernon pretend both to be Earnest, but they know they are not. What Wilde is saying now, is that all Victorians who want to retain the respect of their conventional society are Bunburyist, having in this way a double life, one respectable and one frivolous.[67] Neither of the two Bunburyists is either earnest or Ernest before the very end. So the radical remedy of Bunburying is effected by the cure, the pendulum rests in the perpendicular and Jack's final conviction of "the vital Importance of Being Earnest."[68]

[66] Ibid, p.17
[67] Ibid, p.18
[68] Ibid.

CHAPTER THREE

3. THE IMPORTANCE OF SCREEN.

3.1. The advent of cinema.

During the Victorian era, nineteenth century theatre became the English society's reflection — comedies and plays' representations are the centre of high middle class' life.

The theatrical evening is a usual rite in which ladies and gentlemen could show off elegant evening suits and stir in furnished environments.

The 'pièces bien faites' are comedies born on a devised structure, characterised by: a situation of departure, crisis between characters and a final breakup. Inside them, there are some keys to hold alive the interest of the public — there is always a correlation between spectators and actors.

The relationship between cinema and theatre was born approximately in 1915, thanks to the advent of brothers Lumière's cinema— the world becomes a witness of the project on the screen.[69] Nowadays, theatre could be compared with cinema, but it is necessary to make a distinction

[69] Marina Pellanda, *Cinema e Teatro: Influssi e contaminazioni tra ribalta e pellicola* (2012), Roma, Carocci Editore, p.21.

between two fundamentals: screen and stage.

The imperfection of the cinema, known also as ‘the seventh art’ is given by the superiority that the stage has. In fact, it is almost relegated in the sphere of the lie —it is rich by movements, but without sounds, so transporting the public in an unnatural and monotonous life.

Rudolf Arnheim, who was an important German author, art and film theorist, and perceptual psychologist, mantains that "between the visual action of a theatrical show and the mobile images of a film, some difference of principle doesn't exist" evolving toward a cinema that will come to vindicate "the expressive autonomy and the aesthetical dignity of the cinema adaptation of a theatrical text".[70]

One of the substantial differences between stage and screen consists in the different formal way of fruition of the spectator. The theatre is considered a unique event because it is held in the contemporary presence of the actor and the spectator, while the cinema does not propose some direct contact among who the performer and the viewer. Theatre is an alive show and proposes every time something different, while at the cinema the projection previously proposes something fixed on film, it is therefore always equal for a period. Moreover, at the theatre

[70] Ibid,p.23.

the eye of the spectator embraces the whole space in which the scene is developing, whereas at the cinema the spectator can see only a portion of the place in which the action is happening. [71] Every director who works both for the scene and for the screen, is the principal craftsman of the show because his analysis and his eye influence the reading of the representation.

Certainly, in order to understand the dramaturgical and technical differences between cinema and theatre are, it is necessary to talk about the figure of the receptor, who is the only one that assists to the projection of a film or a stage work and who reconstructs the reading of it through the conscious or unconscious reaction.

The eye contact and confidence are the two focal points both on the stage and on the screen— the human eye serves for recomposing and for creating elements which are typical of the scene. At the theatre, the eye of the spectator is for instance recreated on a specific scene, shot or visual perspective; at the cinema it is possible to find completely different spaces of action besides the basic unity of stage, in every single sequence.

Monitoring the look is the practice that directs the story of the cinema

[71] Ibid, p.24

and it addresses the eye of the spectator, depriving him of some independence proper of who sits on the stalls and to observe all the plans of the stage in which the story is developed. [72]

3.2. Cinematographic Adaptation.

When people talk about cinematographic adaptations, big questions start to be raised. Adaptation as ‘translation’ (from a language to another, from a code to another) or adaptation as ‘betrayal’ of the native work? Does adaptation mean to remain faithful to the literary text or to proceed to one total ‘reinvention’? Someone believes in the idea that changing a story from the literature to the cinema inevitably involves a leaving and a deep transformation of the original text. This is a false dilemma because in reality adapting, which means to translate from a language to another, or to transcode from a text to another, is always a betrayal, but it is also a process of re-appropriation and recreation of a work— a play, a novel, a fiction and so on— that has however to maintain the deep expressive heart of the literary text of departure. Then the most fertile relationship that can be founded among the code literary-record of the story of departure and the audio-visual

[72] Ibid, p.25.

code of the images and of the sounds of the language of cinema, is the respect of the deep sense of the literary work—the psychological and moral substance that connotes plots and characters. The strategies of the adaptation can involve in a job of subtraction of elements present in the literary text that appear in the work of cinema; on the contrary, they can also involve in a job of addition into the film of some elements that are not present in the text but that are useful for a better understanding of the history.

It is very important, in this exact moment to talk about some problematics that are easier to find into a cinematographic adaptation. It is possible to make a distinction between the formal unity of the person and the world and that of the actor and the word: the first is called cinematic ‘presence’ and the second is the theatrical ‘presence’.

The actor, in the theatre, does not play a role because he assumes a manner of speaking, a character which is defined entirely by the text of departure. Dialogue in the theatre is much more irreducible to cinema because it explains everything, while the film’s dialogue, on the other hand, tends towards a manner of expression which is colloquial,

contingent, disengaged from all transcendence.[73] This circumstance does not arise much from the fact that the word "serves" the image—being the cinema a 'visual' art— as from the fact that there is between the two forms of language a constant desynchronization of the orders of duration.[74]

The role of the image in film corresponds exactly to the role of the word in theatre. A film can therefore be like a play— its content may be founded in the concentration of time and space, provided that the form and the manner of speaking are cinematic. On the other hand, even though the role of the image in the film is analogous to that of the word in a play, the visual development of a theatrical work can only deform it because the possibilities of the image are altogether different.

One cannot signify with images what one signifies with words and vice versa. In addition, while time in theatre is a time of words, time in the cinema has its basis in the process of perception; it is not the 'time of the action', as people sometimes say.

Theatrical reality is understood; cinematic reality is perceived. It follows that the intellectual process involved is not at all the same. It is obvious,

[73] Jean Mitry, 'Remarks on the Problem of Cinematic Adaptation' in *The Bulletin of the Midwest Modern Language Association* (Spring, 1971), Vol. 4, No. 1, Midwest Modern Language Association, p.3. Available on < https://www.jstor.org/stable/1314966>
[74] Ibid.

then, that the problem of adaptation is a false problem.

It is insoluble in the conventional ways because it is impossible to translate verbal into visual magic, because the meanings, the perspectives, the potentialities are radically different.[75] While time in the theatre is essentially a time of words, all duration in the cinema which is not sustained by concrete acts becomes dead weight.

The conceptual in the cinema is a function of the real, the transcendent a function of the immenent— which is exactly the reverse of what occurs in the theatre; thus, the impossibility of any kind of formal transposition. Not only are the values different, they also work in different ways.[76]

Speaking of 'adaptation', the only possible solutions to the problem are the following:

- the adaptor follows the story step-by-step, putting it into images— the film, from that moment, is no longer creation or expression, but only representation or illustration.
- The adaptor decides not to trouble to remain faithful to the author; he rethinks the subject and ends by giving it another development and a completely different meaning. He makes a personal work using the original as a point of departure, as an inspiration.

[75] Ibid, pp.3-4.
[76] Ibid.

3.3. Anthony Asquith's adaptation of *The Importance of Being Earnest.*

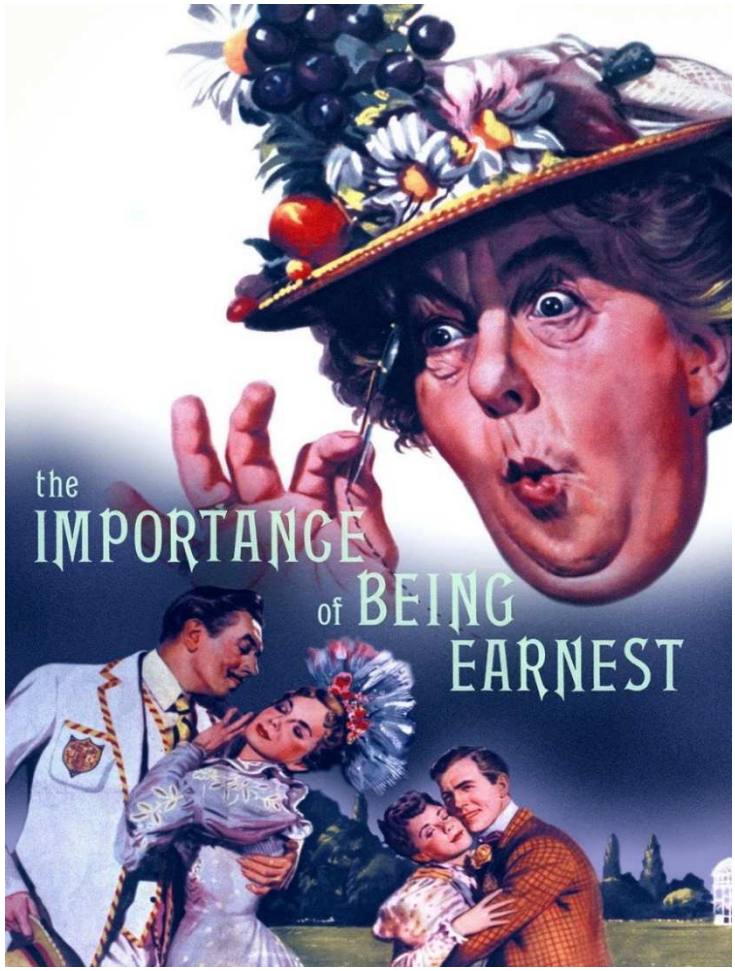
Anthony William Lars Asquith was born in London on 9th November 1902 and died on 20th February 1968. He was an English film director who worked for some notable films, including the 1952 adaptation of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. He was the son of the British Prime Minister Asquith, and Emma Alice Margaret Tennant, alias Margot. His father was known as 'Puffin', which was also his family's nickname. He was educated at Oxford, then lived for a period in Hollywood, where he studied film-making. A year after going back to England, he co-directed his first film. [77]

The film industry was viewed as disreputable when he was young. Asquith was for a long-time friend and colleague of Terence Rattigan—with whom he collaborated on ten films. Asquith was an alcoholic, as many actors reported, and also a repressed homosexual.

Some elements connect Wilde to Anthony Asquith: as aforementioned, Asquith's father, a progressive Prime Minister from 1909 to 1916, had known Wilde socially, but as Home Secretary, he was involved in the

[77] Brian McFarlane, *The Encyclopedia of British Film* (2003), London, Methuen, p.30

prosecution's criminal case against Wilde and he also was one of the officials who signed Wilde's arrest warrant. Anthony himself shrugged off his aristocratic background with an eccentric austerity— he wore his WWII British Home Guard uniform on his film sets for thirty years— but growing up as a member of Wilde's privileged class clearly helped his celluloid presentation of Wilde's satirical subjects.[78]



[78] Doug Childers, "An Offering of Sincere & Studied Triviality in the Face of Disaster Oscar Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest" *in WAG: a magazine for decadent readers* (February 1st, 2003), available on < http://www.thewag.net/film/wilde.htm>

As film historian Bruce Eder observes in the notes that accompany the photo gallery on the Criterion DVD (see image in the previous page), Asquith's *The Importance of Being Earnest* was among the last great movies to come out of the British film industry post-WWII, and it also marked the zenith of the Rank Organisation's association with theatrical works. The screenplay is strikingly close to Wilde's original text; only the most historically obscure lines are deleted or altered.

Asquith decides to adapt Wilde's play emphasizing the stage origins of the project. Asquith made only five films in colour and *The Importance of Being Earnest* was his first. There is a particular richness in the colour palette that also recalls the luxury of theatre-going. The film blends colours and tones into a rich and plush tapestry that visually conveys wealth and aristocracy.

Asquith's direction, which respects the film's theatrical origins without making it feel stage-bound, is pitch-perfect.

But the film's most remarkable feature is its cast:

- Michael Redgrave: Jack John Worthing
- Michael Denison: Algenoon Moncrieff
- Edith Evans: Lady Bracknell or Aunt Augusta

- Joan Greenwood: Guendolen Fairfax
- Dorothy Tutin: Cecilia Cardew
- Margaret Rutherford: Miss Letizia Prism
- Miles Malleson: Dr. Chasuble
- Aubrey Mather: Merriman
- Richard Wattis: Seton
- Walter Hudd: Lane
- Ivor Barnard: inspector of the train

Michael Redgrave and Michael Denison are delightfully buoyant and reflect none of the peculiar morbidity that it is possible to find in other filmic adaptations. Asquith had worked with Redgrave and Margaret Rutherford (Miss Prism), and that experience, along with his appreciation for the stage, as well as his earlier stage-to-cinema projects, paid healthy dividends. [79] The film also features the film debut of Dorothy Tutin and one of the very infrequent performances by Edith Evans who made the part of Lady Bracknell by her own on stage——she first performed it in 1939 and this is only the sixth film she had appeared in since her film debut in 1915.

[79] Ibid.

In Asquith's film not all the roles are performed equally well. Michael Redgrave is too mature to be quite right for Jack but being a finished actor, he succeeds admirably. Michael Denison seems ideally cast for Algernon, and he and Redgrave support each other well, doing their deftest playing in the opening scene, in which Jack's cigarette case, so intriguingly inscribed, is in question. Dame Edith Evans played as Lady Bracknell, but in the film she draged her lines out interminably and in general caricatures the part. This interpretation, however, would seem to be traditional—Shaw's review of the original production mentions the "low comedy soars and swoops of the voice, the rigid shivers of elbow, shoulder, and neck, which are supposed on the stage to characterize the behaviour of ladies after the age of forty".[80] Margaret Rutherford could have been a better choice for the role, but is most happily cast as Miss Prism, whom she makes both comic and appealing. Miles Malleson as Canon Chasuble turns in an exquisite performance, his part cannot in all history have been better played. As to Dorothy Tutin, who is a newcomer to the screen, and Joan Greenwood, who has several times appeared in films, it can only be said that they strive womanfully with Cecily and

[80] John Harrington Smith, "Oscar Wilde's "Earnest" in Film" *in The Quarterly of Film Radio and Television* (Autumn, 1953),Vol. 8, No. 1, University of California Press, available on https://www.jstor.org/stable/1209913 p.3.

Gwendolen and are acceptable, though scarcely more than that. Miss Tutin probably comes closer in acting than in pulchritude to her role as the author conceived it, but it must be admitted that its demands are unconscious. [81] Overall, it must be said that Anthony Asquith, who made the adaptation and did the directing, managed to bring the characters across quite well and to preserve the plot in all its whimsical preposterousness. [82] It is necessary to talk about the cutting in the adaptation, because it had to be made to keep the film to standard playing time, but any cuttings were thought of as not fair and for Earnest, it is now generally agreed, is the best of Wilde's play.

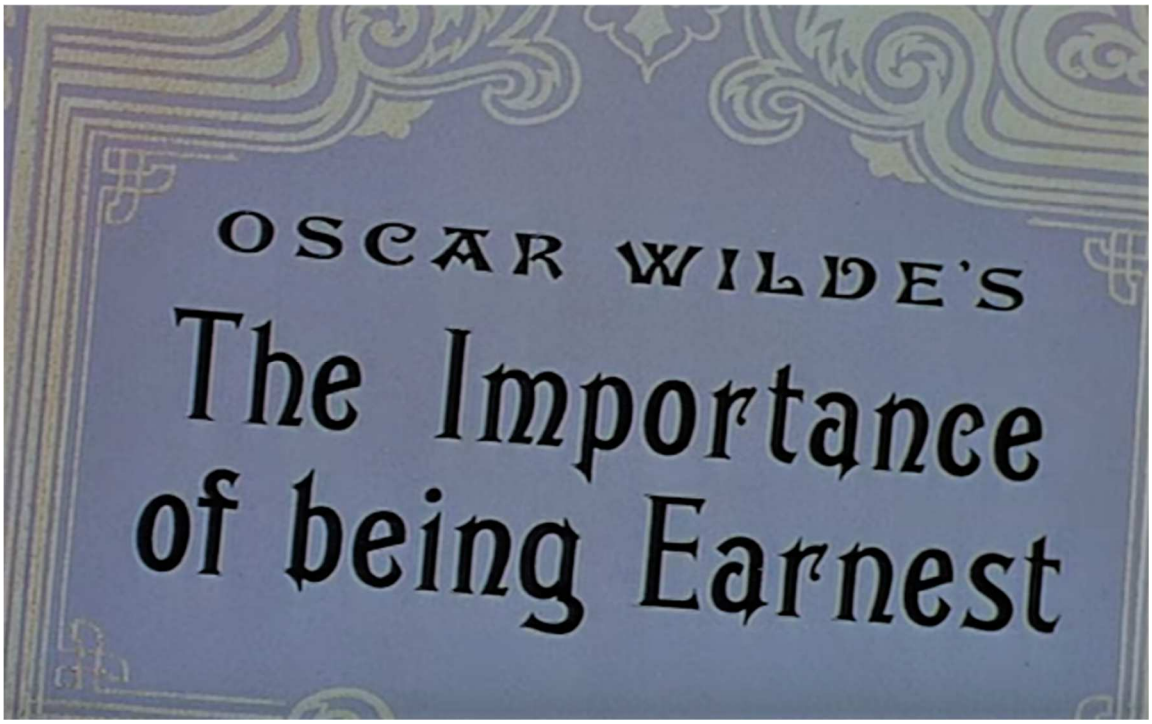
The beauties of dialogue are now ‘dated’—period pieces, illustrations of what audiences in the early Nineties play. Their dramaturgy is ‘well-made’, the psychology of their characters patently false and the basis on which the issues in them are decided are uncompromisingly sentimental. Opinions differ as to whether Wilde was aware of how sentimental they were. It seems fairly clear that he was but pleased to exploit this assured path to success while narcissistically admiring his own talents, which could create polished works of art from such shooty materials.[83]

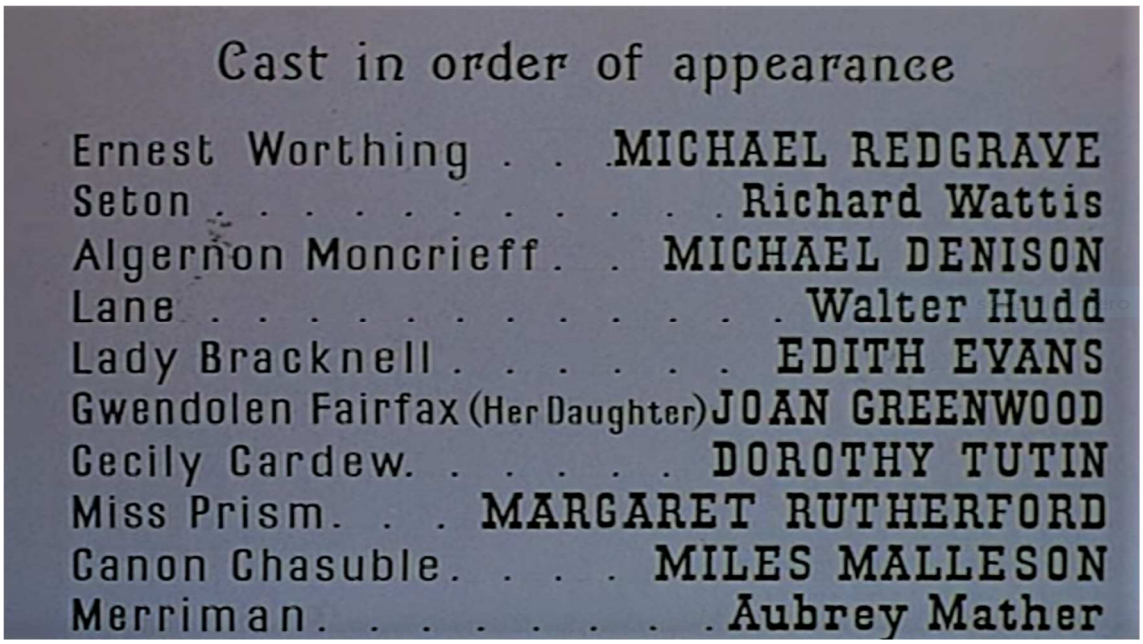
[81] Ibid, p.3-4
[82] Ibid.
[83] Ibid.

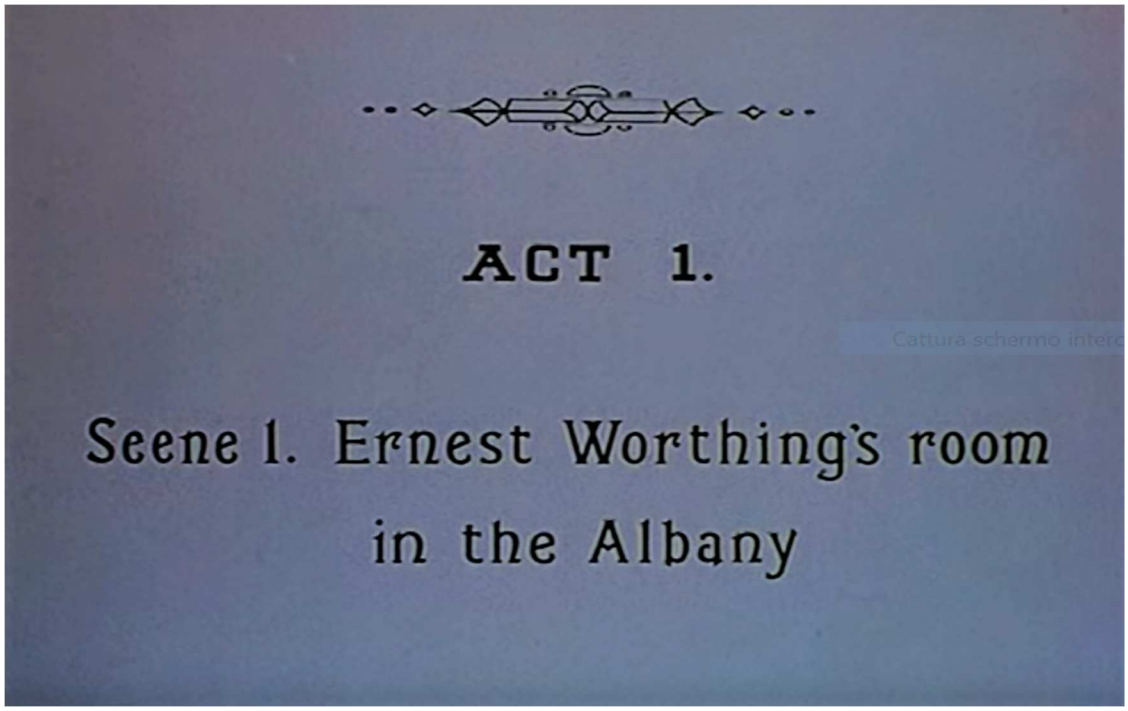
The Asquith's filmic adaptation is not divided in three acts as the work of Wilde's plan, but it is divided in more scenes that are set in different places.

The first one was in London in the same year of the publication, while in Italy it appeared in 1953, ahead of the USA.

The film is the most faithful stage to screen adaptations ever made of Wilde's work. It opens with two members of a Victorian theatre audience, a male and a female who are taking their seats. When they open their programmes (see images below), the film's credits are revealed, printed inside.







Once the curtain rises, the female viewer uses her eyeglasses to take the

spectator into the action; shortly after it is possible to see a mixture of location and studio shots. As it is possible to see, the third image is the only one scene in which there is the inscription of the ACT I, which alludes to the fact other act division may be presented during the rapresentation, but it is not.

The first difference that the spectator can obviously see is the setting of the Act I. In Oscar Wilde's play it begins in the Morning-room in Algernon's flat in Half-Moon Street, while in Asquith's film adaptation it starts in Ernest Worthing's room in the Albany where Jack sings while taking a bath. Suddenly, the scene changes in the same house, but in another room at the presence of Algernon Moncrieff, his friend.

Jack: Eating as usual, I see, Algy!

Algernon: I believe it is usual in good society to take some slight refreshment after morning exercise.

After that, they talk about what Ernest did in town and what kind of people he amused, until Algernon reveals to Ernest that his cousin Gwendolen and his Aunt, Lady Bracknell, must have a tea with him in the afternoon. Then Algy proposes in a very singular way to come to his house in order to propose to Gwendolen. Furthermore, in this first scene, another main situation appears: this when Algy tries to understand who

the person is whose name is Jack and tries to know who Cecily is.

Algernon: My dear fellow, Gwendolen is my first cousin. And before I allow to marry her, you will have to clear up the whole question of Cecily!

Jack: Why on earth do you mean? Why on earth do you mean, Algy, by Cecily! I don't know any one of the name of Cecily. Do you mean to say you have my cigarette case all this time? […]

Algy mantains that Ernest cigarette case is not really his.

Algernon: Yes, but this isn't your cigarette case. This cigarette case is a present from some one of the name of Cecily, and you said you didn't know anyone of that name.

After having tried several times, Jack finally tells the truth about what has happened—Jack is Ernest.

Jack: Well, my name is Ernest in town and Jack in the country, and the cigarette was given to me in the country.

Algernon: I may mention that I have always suspected you of being a confirmed and secret Bunburyst; and I am quite sure of it now.

As can be seen in the previous chapter, talking about the Wilde's play, one of the main topic is the 'Bunburyst'.

Algernon: I'll reveal to you the meaning of that incomparable expression […] You have invented a very useful younger brother called Ernest, in order that you may be able to come up to town as often you like. I have invented an invaluable permanent invalid called Bunbury, in order that I may be able to go down into into the country whenever I choose. Bunbury is perfectly invaluable. If it wasn't for Bunbury's

extraordinary bad health, for instance, I wouldn't be able to dine with you at Willis' tonight, for I have been really engaged to Aunt Augusta for more than a week.

In this exact moment, the setting changes and returns to the original location imposed by the play, the Morning-room in Algernon's flat in Half-Moon Street with Jack who rings the bell and at the same time, Algernon has a conversation with Lane, the servant. The dialogue between them is shorter than in ACT I and, most importantly, Asquith excluded Lane's opinion about marriage, by omitting completely this part from the scene. The film director, in fact, goes directly when Aunt Augusta arrives. Lady Bracknell and Gwendolen enter in scene here. Both women have a different approach with Ernest— the first one shows an icy coldness in front of him, while the second treats him with generosity, warmth and kindness. After that, the dialogues between Algy and the Aunt begin talking also about the poor friend Bunbury, who is the reason why he denies having a dinner with her that evening. The situation becomes more interesting when Aunt Augusta and Algy go into the music-room, while Gwendolen remains behind. Ernest takes advantage of Lady Bracknell's absence to propose to his love Gwendolen, who also loves him, but not as he supposed.

Jack: Miss Fairfax, ever since I met you I have admired you more than any girl…I

have ever met since…I met you.

Gwendolen: My ideal has always been to love some one of the name of Ernest. There is something in that name that inspires absolute confidence. […] the moment Algernon first mentioned to me that he had a friend called Ernest, I knew I was destined to love you.

Jack: you really love me, Gwendolen?

Gwendolen: Passionately.

In this exact moment, the situation became really fun, because Gwendolen, as the spectator can see, is in love with Ernest, because of his name. She is in love with this name whose meaning is 'being an honest person' as it has just been mentioned in the previous chapter. It is important to say that this scene, as many others, is very faithful to the original text.

Jack: But you don't really mean to say that you couldn't love me if my name wasn't Earnest? But supposing it was something else? Do you mean to say you couldn't love me them?

Gwendolen: ah! That it is clearly a metaphysical speculation, and like most metaphysical speculation has very little reference at all to the actual facts of real life, as we know them.

Jack: Well, Gwendolen, I must say that there are lots of other much nicer name. I think Jack, for instance, a charming name.

Gwendolen: Jack?... there is very little music in the name Jack. […] I pity any woman who is married to a man called John. […] the only really safe name is Ernest.

After this apparently misapprehension, Jack and Gwendolen are finally engaged to be married, but now another problem rises up: the origin of Mr. Worthing which leads Lady Bracknell to not approve to give his own daughter as spouse to a 'hand-bag' (see image above).

Lady Bracknell: You can hardly imagine that I and Lord Bracknell would dream of allowing our only daughter—a girl brought up with the utmost care—to marry into a cloakroom, and form an alliance with a parcel? Good morning, Mr. Worthing!

Lady Bracknell goes out taking her daughter with her, and Mr. Worthing starts being suspicious about the future, because he is afraid that her only and pure lover could become like her mother. Some lines after, Miss Fairfax goes back in Algy's room.

Gwendolen: Ernest, we may never be married. From the expression on mamma's face I fear we never shall. Few parents nowdays pay any regard to what their children say to them. The old-fashioned respect for the young is fast dying out. Whatever influence I ever had over mamma, I lost at the age of three. But although she may prevent us from becoming man and wife, and I may marry some one else, and marry often, nothing that she can possibly do can alter my eternal devotion to you.

Algernon, who is in the same room, behind Gwendolen, tries to take advantage of the situation, listening to every single word they say.

Gwendolen: Your Christian name has an irresistible fascination. The simplicity of your character makes you exquisitely incomprehensible to me. Your town address at the Albany I have. What is your address in the country?

Jack: The Manor House, Woolton, Hertfordshire.

This address is really important for Algernon, because he knows this will be the only way which would allow him to meet 'the little Cecily'—

he writes it on his shirt-cuff (image below).

In Wilde's play ACT II begins, while in the cinematographic adaptation there is no division in acts and there is a sort of continuity between them. The scene is set in the Manor House, in Hertfordshire, Jack's country house. The first two characters that can be seen are Cecily Cardew and Miss Prism, who tries to give her a German lesson. This moment is very faithful as the rest part of the opera, yet there are some text addictions in order to give more meaning to the text, such as when Miss Prism talks about the neutral form of the diminutives (e.g. Das Fräulein, Das Mädchen). Contemporary to this lesson, there is Algy eating on the train, as he usually does, whose direction is the Manor House. After that, Dr. Chasuble arrives. He is a Canon and he is secretly in love with Miss

Prism. Cecily, who does not want to do her morning lesson, tries to keep Miss Prism out.

Cecily: Miss Prism has just been complaining of a slight headache. I think it would do her so much good to have a short stroll with you in the Park, Dr. Chasuble.

In this scene, there is a dialogue between the Canon and Laetitia that in the play comes after the first meeting of Cecily with Algernon. On the other hand, Anthony Asquith wants to give a little continuity to the text without breaking their dialogue, as Oscar Wilde did. Only now, the Merriman arrives and announces to Miss Cecily Cardew that Uncle Jack's brother, Ernest, has arrived and is waiting, impatiently, for her in the morning room. During their dialogue, some words that are typically used in Wilde's play are substituted by a much simpler language—one thinks about, for example, the word 'Quixotic' which is substituted by another word with the same meaning as 'romantic'. Now, the scene comes back to Miss Prism and Dr. Chasuble walking in the garden of Manor House until Mr. Worthing carriage arrives and he is dressed in a deepest mourning, with crape hatband and black gloves. In fact, Jack announces that his wicked brother Ernest is dead.

Jack: Poor Ernest! He had many faults, but it is a sad, sad blow.

Little Cecily sees that her Uncle is back and goes toward him but in a

happy way and not in a melancholy manner as in Wilde's play.

Cecily: I have got such a surprise for you. Who do you think is in the dining-room? Your brother Ernest. He arrived about half an hour ago.

Jack: What nonsense! I haven't got a brother.

Cecily: Don't say that. However badly he may have behaved to you in the past he is still your brother.

Algernon, during their conversation, goes out to the door threshold saying:

Algernon: Brother John, I have come down from town to tell you that I am very sorry for all the trouble I have given you, and I intend to lead a better life in the future.

Jack seems annoyed by his presence there and he refuses his hand, and this makes Cecily unhappy and angry, that tells his Uncle that she will never talk with him again if he does not shake his hands with Ernest. Algy and Jack finally shake their hands. Both male characters walk into the house and talk about their baptism, which they both have to undertake in the afternoon with Canon Chasuble. The only different element that appears from the original text is the fact that Algernon does not reveal to Jack that he is in love with Cecily. The only thing he can do is to take, as his usual, advantages of this situation in order to propose to the 'prettiest girl' he ever saw. After that, Cecily enters the house from

the garden and starts to water the flowers, when Algy is on her back (image below).

They talk about that with absolute frankness—alluding that it is normal for a person whose name is Ernest— about her diary, about the many letters they send each other and also about the many times in which Cecily has left him. Cecily says that their engagement is signed for the 14th February— which is also the date of the opening night at St. George theatre— and that they will never break it off again.

Cecily: I don't think I could break it off now that I have actually met you. Besides, of course there is the question of your name. It seems like a dream. Beside of course, there is the question of your name.

Here, as it is possible to see, Asquith, to give a better idea about Wildean Earnestness, added in Cecily's previous line the word 'dream'.

Cecily: You must not laugh at me, darling, but it had always been a girlish dream of mine to love some one whose name was Ernest. There is something in that name that seems to inspire absolute confidence. I pity any poor married woman whose husband is not called Ernest.

Algernon: But, my dear child, do you mean to say you could not love me if I had some other name?

Cecily: But what name?

Algernon: Oh any name you like – Algernon – for instance…

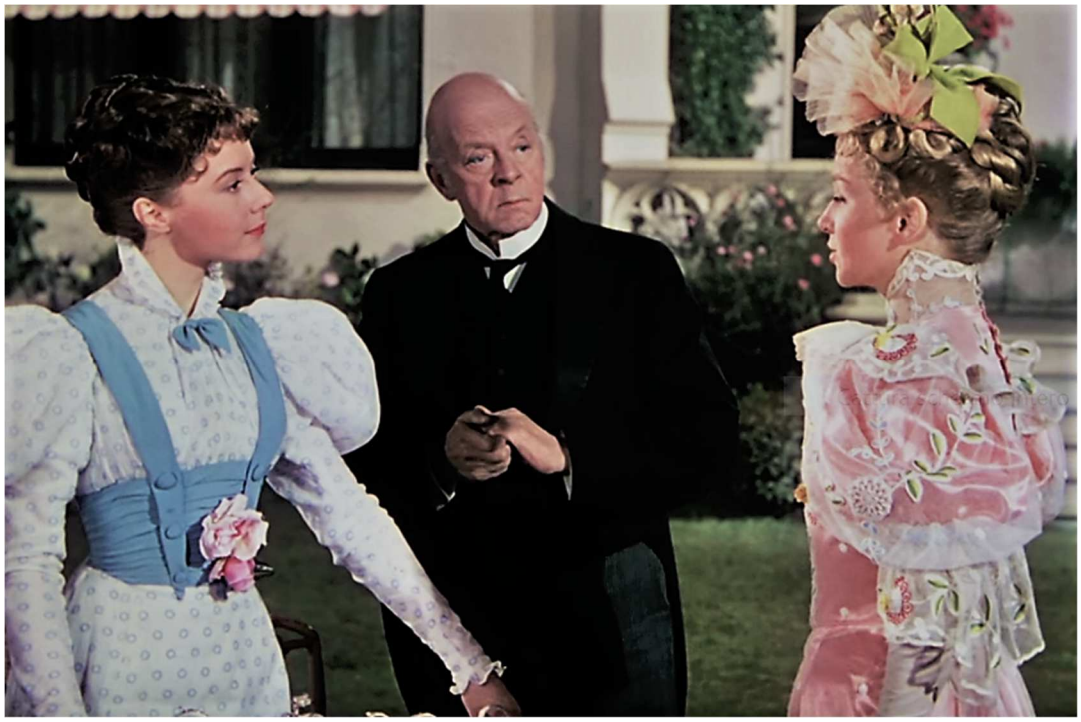
Cecily: But I don't like the name Algernon

Algernon: […] if my name was Algy, couldn't you love me?

Cecily: I might respect you, Ernest, I might admire your character, but I fear that I should not be able to give you my undivided attention.

After this misapprehension, which is similar to that of Gwendolen and Jack, they are finally engaged, but Algy knows well that this marriage can be celebrated only if he baptises himself as Ernest. Suddenly, the scene changes. Now the setting is outside the house, in the garden, where Cecily is waiting for the Merriman to have a cup of tea, but he arrives introducing Miss Gwendolen Fairfax and they apparently become friends until the fateful moment in which both girls think they are engaged to the

same Ernest and the feud starts (image below).



Cecily: Mr. Ernest Worthing and I are engaged to be married.

Gwendolen: My darling Cecily, I think there must be some slight error Mr Ernest Worthing is engaged to me.

The situation seems to be resolved when both Jack and Algernon arrive and embrace their respective girlfriends, but they do not know what has happened before between the two young ladies and are confused by this unfortunate incident.

Gwendolen: Ernest! My own Ernest!

Jack: Gwendolen! Darling!

Gwendolen: A moment! May I ask you if you are engaged to be married to this

young lady? […]

Cecily: I knew there must be some misunderstanding, Miss Fairfax. The gentleman whose arm is at the present round your waist is my guardian, Mr. John Worthing.

Gwendolen: I beg your pardon?

Cecily: This is Uncle Jack.

Gwendolen: Jack! Oh!

Cecily: Here is Ernest.

Algernon: My own love!

Cecily: A moment, Ernest! May I ask you if you are engaged to be married to this young lady?

Algernon: To what young lady? Good heavens! Gwendolen! […]

Gwendolen: I felt there was some slight error, Miss Cardew. The gentleman who is now embracing you is my cousin, Mr. Algernon Moncrieff.

Both Gwendolen and Cecily are now angry with their respective future husbands because of their disrespectful conduct.

Gwendolen: I am afraid it is quite clear, Cecily, that neither of us is engaged to be married to anyone.

The two ladies are sure that Algy and Jack will arrive right after, if they get into the house. In that exact moment, a conversation starts between the two men, and also Lady Bracknell is on the train having a conversation with the guard about how many train stops she has passed before arriving at Woolton. This scene, in fact, is very important because

it is a ‘necessary’ addition. This happens probably because Asquith, unlike Wilde, does not want to give the element of surprise when Aunt Augusta arrives at The Manor House, Woolton, Hertfordshire. After that, there is the end of ACT II with Jack and Algernon talking about what has happened before with Cecily and Gwendolen.

At the beginning of ACT III, remembering that Asquith has preferred not to make a distinction among the three acts for a question of continuity, it is easier to find the same situation encountered before. The setting is the Morning-room with Cecily and Gwendolen looking through the window spying on their future husbands who after some minutes, enter the room singing a popular air from a British opera.

Gwendolen: Mr. Worthing, I have something very particular to ask you. Much depends on your reply.

Cecily: Gwendolen, your common sense is invaluable. Mr. Moncrieff, kindly answer me the following question. Why did you pretend to be my guardian’s brother?

Algernon: In order that I might have an opportunity of meeting you. […]

Gwendolen: Mr, Worthing, what explanation can you offer to me for pretending to have a brother? Was it in order that you might have an opportunity of coming up to town to see as often as possible?

Jack: Can you doubt it, Miss Fairfax?

When both ladies decide to forgive Jack and Cecily, another problem

arises: the question of the name.

Gwendolen and Cecily: Your Christian names are still an insuperable barrier. That is all!

This phrase in the Wildean text is simply spoken, while in Asquith's cinematographic adaptation is sung by both women.

Jack and Algernon: Our Christian names! Is that all? But we are going to be christened this afternoon.

Gwendolen: for my sake you are prepared to do this terrible thing?

Jack: I am.

Cecily: To please me you are ready to face this fearful ordeal?

Algernon: I am!

In this exact moment Lady Bracknell arrives.

Lady Bracknell: Gwendolen! What does this mean?

Gwendolen: Merely that I am engaged to be married to Mr Worthing, mamma.

Lady Bracknell: Come here. Sit down. Sit down immediately. You will clearly understand that all communication between yourself and my daughter must cease immediately from this moment. On this point, as indeed on all points, I am firm.

Apart from some textual reductions, such as the previous line, in which the monologue of Lady Bracknell has been suited for the film, the text is very faithful in this part. Here, in fact, there is a conversation among five characters: Algy, Cecily, Gwendolen, Jack and of course Lady Bracknell. The problematic that occurs now is only the marriage—Algy willing to

marry Cecily and Jack willing to marry Gwendolen; but only one couple obtains Aunt Augusta's benediction.

Jack: Miss Cardew is the grand-daughter of the late Mr Thomas Cardew of 149 Belgrave Square, S.W.; Gervase Park, Dorking, Surrey; and the Sporran, Fifeshire, N.B. […]

Lady Bracknell: I had better ask you if Miss Cardew has any little fortune?

Jack: Oh! About a hundred and thirty thousand pound in the Funds. That is all. Good-bye, Lady Bracknell. So pleased to have seen you.

Suddenly, Lady Bracknell changes her opinion about considering Cecily "the most attractive young lady", but something goes wrong because Aunt Augusta's benediction is no longer required for the marriage.

Jack: I beg your pardon for interrupting you, Lady Bracknell, but this engagement I quite out of the question. I am Miss Cardew's guardian, and she cannot marry without my consent until she comes of age. That consent I absolutely decline to give. […]

Lady Bracknell: How old are you, dear?

Cecily: Well, I am really only eighteen, but I always admit to twenty when I go to evening parties.

Lady Bracknell: […] so I don't think your guardian's consent is, after all, a matter of any importance.

Jack: Pray excuse me, Lady Bracknell for interrupting you again, but it is only fair to tell you that according to the terms of her grandfather's will Miss Cardew does not

come legally of age till she is thirty-five.

Lady Bracknell tries in every way to get engage to Cecily with Algernon, but rather unsuccessfully. It seems like a marriage contract.

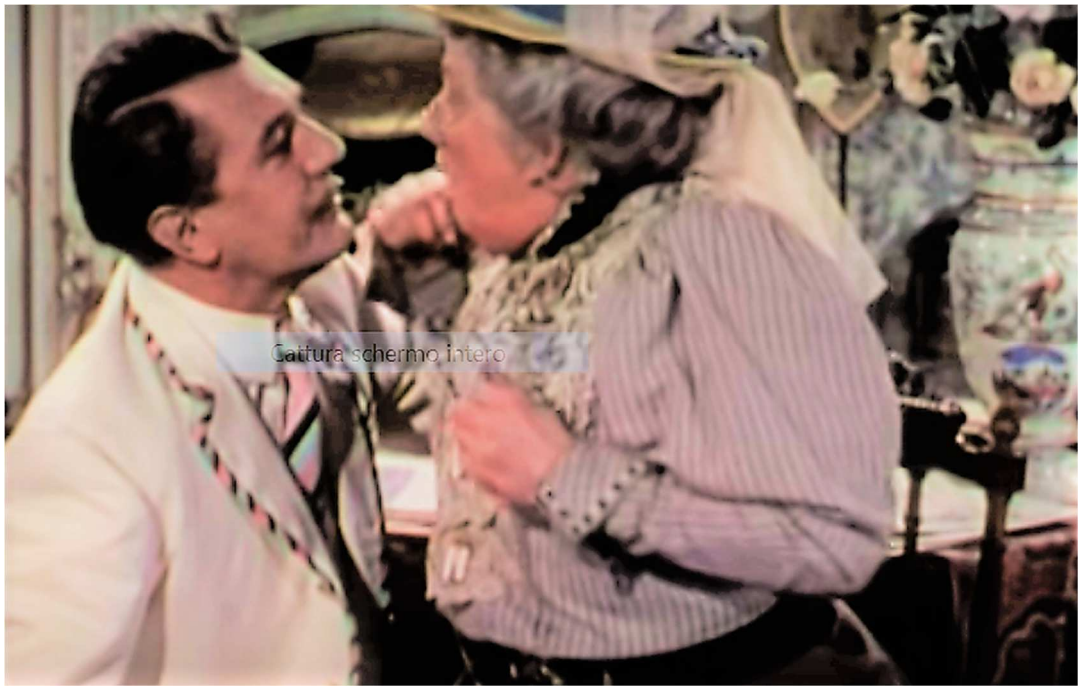
Jack: My dear Lady Bracknell, the matter is entirely in your own hands. The moment you consent to my marriage with Gwendolen, I will mostly gladly allow your nephew to form an alliance with my ward.

Lady Bracknell replies that what Jack has proposed to her is "out of question" because Gwendolen is her daughter, while Algernon is her nephew and he can choose for himself. During this inappropriate conversation, Dr. Chasuble, who remains out of stage until this very moment, arrives and is ready for the christenings of both gentlemen. Lady Bracknell thinks that this baptism at their age is obsolete, irreligious and grotesque. The canon, when there is no celebration anymore, prefers to come to Miss Prism who is waiting for him in the vestry. This calling provokes some reactions in Aunt Augusta, who wants to see immediately this "picture of respectability".

Lady Bracknell: Prism! Come here Prism! Where is that baby?

Miss Prism, as a matter of fact, twenty-eight years before took a baby of a male sex without returning to Lord Bracknell's house. Lady Bracknell, hearing her name being called by the canon, wants to know where this baby is. Miss Prism, outraged by that request and a bit afraid too, says

that she has no idea about that because she has left him in the cloakroom of the Victoria station. Asquith now overlooks some details that are in Wilde's play, jumping directly to the moment in which Jack takes the hand-bag from this room in order to know if he might in fact be that baby. Miss Prism says that the bag is undoubtedly hers.



Jack: Yes…mothers!

After this pathetic scene, Lady Bracknell declares that he is Mrs. Moncrieff's son, her sister, and consequently he is the Algernon's elder brother.

Jack: Then I have a brother after all. I knew I had a brother! I always said I had a brother! Cecily, how could you ever doubted that I had a brother?

Now, Gwendolen asks him which his Christian name is. Undoubtedly, Lady Bracknell is the only one who can answer that question and she says that his name is the same of his father. Unfortunately, she cannot remember which name that was, but it appears in the Army Lists of the period. Jack decides to consult it immediately.

Jack: […] Moncrieff! Lieutenant 1840, Captain, Lieutenant-Colonel, General 1869, Christian names, Ernest John.

Gwendolen: Ernest! My own Ernest!

Now that all the misunderstandings have been resolved, Algy and Cecily, Miss Prism and Dr. Chasuble, Gwendolen and Jack can all embrace one another, while Lady Bracknell is looking for them.(see image below)

Asquith's filmic adaptation ends in the most faithful way possible, with the same Wildean punchline.

Jack: I've now realised for the first time in my life the vital Importance of Being Earnest.

At the very end, the curtain falls, because similarly to what happens at the beginning of the play with the opening of the drapes, in the last and only act present in this adaptation, too, it is important to hold firm to the idea of being in a theatre and being a spectator of *the Importance of Being Earnest.*

CHAPTER FOUR

4. WILDE ON SCREEN.

4.1. The Gaze of Contemporary Cinema.

Stephen Heath, one of the founders of *Screen*, the British journal of film criticism and theory, believes that "something changes between 22 March and 28 December 1895. Between the scientific and industrial presentation (the first Lumière demonstration of the cinématographe) and the start of commercial exploitation (the first public performance in the Grand Café), the screen is fixed in what will come to be its definitive place. The spectators are no longer set on either side of translucent screen but have been assigned their position in front of the image which unrolls before them—*cinema* begins."[84]

Roland Barthes argues that "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author" and then, the death of the theatre may be said to result from the birth of the cinema, with "the public screened from production, fixed in the image".[85]

Wilde's rebirth on the cinematic screen has been a reincarnation of

[84] Oliver S. Buckton, "Oscar goes to Hollywood" in *Oscar Wilde and the Modern Culture: the making of a legend* (2008), edited by Joseph Bristow, United States of America, Ohio University Press, p. 310.
[85] Ibid, p.311, quoted by Stephen Heath, *Question of Cinema* (London: Macmillan, 1981) p.9

Wilde's status as author, while reproducing him as spectacle means popular consumption. This reinvention of Wilde as the object of the cinematic gaze is close to his construction as a spectacle during the trials, and thus implicates his homosexuality. An example of that is provided by the transposition of his life in *Wilde* directed by Brian Gilbert and completely based on Richard Ellmann's biography. In addition, there are the transposition of his two final plays, *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, both directed by Oliver Parker. Thanks to that, in few years Oscar Wilde becomes prominent in the world of cinema, even though he has been largely absent from the big screen for almost a generation.[86] In this thesis in fact, most of the discussion is focused on *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oliver Parker.

4.2. Oliver Parker's adaptation of *The Importance of Being Earnest.*

Oliver Parker was born in 1960 in Plymouth. He is the son of the British businessman and chairman of the British Railways Boar, Sir Peter Parker, and of Lady Jillian Parker, a famous writer. He has only a brother, another notorious and famous actor, Nathaniel Parker. He began his career as a television actor. He is best known for his extraordinary re-

[86] Ibid, p. 312.

interpretation of *Othello* (1995) that is also his first direction. Impressive but not particularly innovative his version of the play *An Ideal Husband* (1999), marked by a sharp sense of its contemporary relevance and a willingness to take risks in offering Wilde purists in the interests of dis-embalming the piece.[87] No doubt this success encouraged him to take on next *The Importance of Being Earnest* (2002), untouched on screen, except for TV and an unseen all-black US version (1991) since Asquith's seemingly definitive adaptation (1952). [88]

The film was produced by Barnaby Thompson, David Brown and Uri Fruchtmann. The screenplay was entirely written by Oliver Parker. It was distributed by Miramax Films, firstly in the US (17 May 2002) and after in the UK (6 September 2002) and it has three different production companies: Ealing Studios, Film Council and Newmarket Capital Group. An important aspect that is impossible to find in Asquith's film adaptation is the music score composed by Charlie Mole.

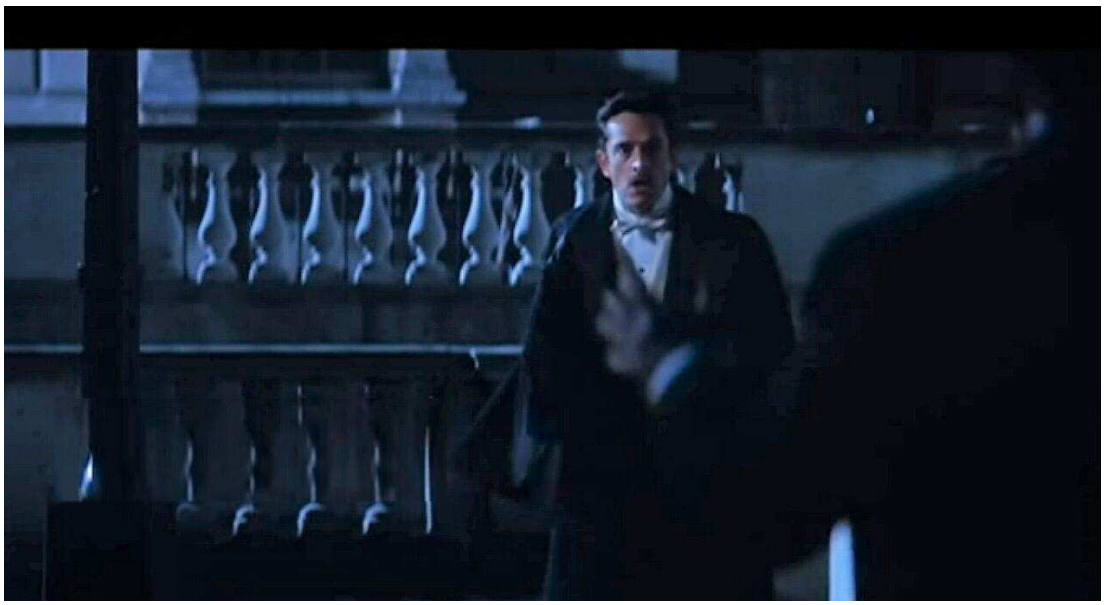
[87] B.M, *The Encyclopedia of British Film* (2003), p.537
[88] Ibid.

The cast is made up by:

- Rupert Everett: Algernon Moncrieff
- Colin Firth: John Jack Worthing
- Frances O'Connor: Gwendolen Fairfax
- Reese Witherspoon: Cecily Cardew
- Judi Dench: Lady Bracknell
- Tom Wilkinson: Dr Chasuble
- Anna Massey: Miss Prism

- Edward Fox: Lane
- Patrick Godfrey: Merriman

The recent film version of *Earnest* significantly diminishes both the homoerotic overtones of Wilde's play and its suggestion of cross-class relationships. There are not major changes to the script, but some scenes of Wilde's play are omitted from stage productions—and this may indicate the power of cinema to remake literary text into mass cultural products with very different ideological effects.[89] The film removes traces of the connection between Jack/Algy and Wilde/Bosie relationships, which have suggested to some readers that the play covertly alludes to Wilde's homosexual life in the 1890s.[90]



[89] O.Buckton, "Oscar Goes to Hollywood" in *Oscar Wilde and the Modern Culture: The Making of a Legend* (2008), cit., p. 328.
[90] Ibid.

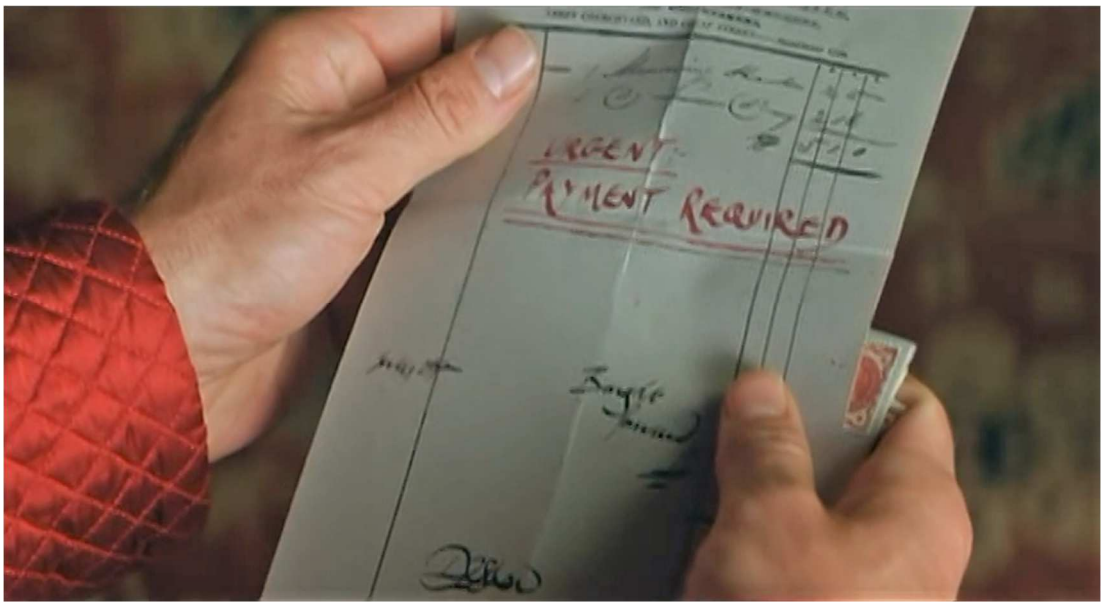
The opening scene of the film represents one of its most significant departures from the text of the play: the scene is set at night in Victorian London, and a man elegantly attired in a formal evening dress is being pursued through the streets by what appear to be policemen (see image in the previous page).[91] Oliver S. Buckton claims that the viewer might anticipate that this character is being pursued for his sexual transgressions, knowing of Wilde's scandalous conviction for homosexuality, but there is no absolute relation between that and what the real scene wants to represent. Algernon, who is the character depicted in the image above, is pursued by law not for sexual offences but for not having paid his dining bills.[92]

The original opening scene is set in the Morning-room of Algernon's flat in Half-Moon Street where Algy is playing the piano and Lane arranging the tea table. The only difference from the original text is the screenplay, because here there is this constant presence of the un-paid bills.

Algernon: Bills, bills, bills. All I ever get is bills.

Lane: And then there's the matter of my unpaid wages, sir.

[91] Ibid, p.328.
[92] Ibid, p. 329.



The ACT I and ACT II move in overlapping, in fact the second scene on screen is in The Manor House, Woolton, Hertfordshire, where Jack Worthing is organising his departure to the town.

Jack: Yet again the wasteful habits of my brother Ernest tear me from my duties here.

When he is leaving Hertfordshire, he calls Merriman and asks him about the cigarette case that he cannot find anymore. The cigarette case is in fact the only fateful element that characterizes all the first part of Parker's cinematographic adaptation. Thinking about that, the film, by contrast to the original text, sets the dialogue between Jack and Algy about the cigarette case not in Algernon's house but in a private cabaret or nightclub, which is important because it gives Algy and Jack, known as

Ernest, the chance to meet. Buckton claims that "the camera depicts Algy cheering at the exposed petticoats of the showgirls, and—following Jack's admission that he has come to London for 'pleasure, pleasure!'—seeing two young women glancing with interest at the men, creating a visual link between Jack's stated motive of pleasure and the sexual pursuit of women"[93] Algernon, before offering him a cigarette from Jack's cigarette case, tries to persuade him—and despite the difference in the setting, the screenplay is very faithful to the original. In the turmoil of the nightclub, Jack asks "What plans have you got for tea tomorrow?"; Algy replies that he knows perfectly well that Aunt Augusta and Gwendolen are coming for tea. Oliver Parker uses "the dream" in order to better express characters' ideas and ways of thinking.

For example, during the conversation, when Algy pronounces the names

[93] Ibid, p. 330

of Aunt Augusta and Gwendolen, time Jack imagines at the same that both ladies are loading up the arrows. It is interesting that the exact moment when Gwendolen shoots it, the arrow suddenly strikes Jack's heart (see image above). Ernest wants to propose to Gwendolen, but Algy thinks that back in he is back in town not for love, but for business. Finally there is the episode regarding Jack's cigarette case, where also the setting changes—it is always in the cabaret, yet this time around the Russian roulette's table where Algy offers Ernest a cigarette and discovers that it is his.

Algernon: Anyway, I certainly can't see you and Gwendolen being married.

Jack: Why on earth do you say that?

Algernon: Well, in the first place, I don't give my consent.

Jack: Your consent?

Algernon: My dear fellow, Gwendolen is my cousin and before I allow you to marry her, you shall have to clear up this whole question of Cecily.

Jack: Cecily? What on earth do you mean? I don't know anyone by the name of Cecily. Do you mean you have had my cigarette case all this time?

In Buckton's opinion, the focus on this scene is the cigarette case that Algy has found, quizzing Jack about its inscription. This object was for him an important piece of evidence used to incriminate Wilde, and its criminal implications are suggested by "the large reward" that Jack pro-

posed to offer for it and that Algy wishes he would offer, when Algy says, “I happen to be more than usually hard up”.[94]

The cigarette case, in this way, becomes an excuse to talk about their secret double life as ‘Bunburyist’ that seems to be common knowledge; both men are comfortable with such public familiarity with their private lives. Buckton suggests that “Bunburying corresponds to the typical womanizing of the Victorian man-about-town”.[95] This dialogue, which takes place in the presence of a crowd in a lounge area and encircled by some women who laugh at their remarks, continues in the street later that evening, where Algy charges Jack with being an “advanced Bunburyist”.

Algernon: you are one of the most advanced...Bunburyist I know. […]

Jack: "Bunburyist"?

This opening scene ends again with the pursuing of Algy by debt collectors. After that, the first thing that the spectator thinks about is for sure ‘what does Bunburyist mean?’; but Oliver Parker decides to anticipate ACT II with Miss Prism and Cecily without following the real act division imposed in Wilde’s comedy. Cecily and Laetitia are sitting around the table together in the garden and they are taking one of their usual German lessons imposed by Uncle Jack.

[94] Ibid, p. 330.
[95] Ibid.

Cecily: I'm not in favour of this modern mania for turning bad people into good people...

This addiction to the original Wildean text is another element to reinforce the concept of ‘imagination’ and ‘vision’ typical of this 2002 cinematographic adaptation. In this exact moment it is in fact possible to find Cecily who practically is taking her German lesson, but in reality she is skimming through her diary and something happens in her mind—she thinks about a man from the silver armour galloping toward her. Then, the scene moves again to Morning-room of Algernon’s flat in Half-Moon Street where Jack introduces himself with ‘Bunburyist’.

Jack: What on earth do you mean by a "Bunburyist"?

Algernon: You have invented a very useful younger brother called Ernest in order that you may be able to come up to town as often as you like. I have invented an invaluable permanent invalid called Bunbury in order that I may be able to go down to the country as often as I choose. If it wasn't for Bunbury's extraordinary bad health for instance, I wouldn't be able to dine with you at the Savoy tonight, for I've had an appointment with Aunt Augusta for more than a week.

This ‘Bunburying’ conversation ends with Aunt Augusta ringing the bell; in this very moment it is funny to see how the idea of the debtors coming for him is always in Algy’s head.

Algy: That must be her. Only relatives or creditors ever ring in that Wagnerian manner.

Now, it's time for Ernest/Jack to propose to Gwendolen.

Jack's proposal is absolutely faithful to the original text, as well as Asquith's screenplay, but it is necessary to make an important distinction between both cinematographic adaptations because of Gwendolen's approach towards him. In fact she is not so serious as Asquith's Gwendolen—she is open-minded, flexible and unrestricted and free both in tone, in attitudes and in the way in which she is playing her character. Moreover, Parker's Gwendolen is more sensual, passionate and incline to the laughter. Then, Aunt Augusta enters the proposal room, but she is annoyed by what she has seen and so decides to invite Mr. Worthing in her

house in order to ask him some questions before approving the marriage of her only daughter—this change of setting into Lady Bracknell's house is not truthful at all to the text of departure. In the evening of the same day, Algy and Jack go to the Savoy Hotel to have dinner and talk about who Ernest is. This discontinuity in the screenplay about Earnestness is probably a way for Parker to maintain a sort of suspense in the eye of the spectator. Back around the time of the dinner at Savoy, this is another element added by the director to keep on talking about the question of the un-payment of bills, in fact Ernest and Algy go away without paying for dinner.

Algernon: Oh, my dear fellow, you forgot to pay the bill.

Jack: Not at all, I make it a point never to pay at the Savoy.

Algernon: Why on earth not? You have heaps of money.

Jack: Yes, but Ernest hasn't and he's got quite a reputation to keep up.

After that, the scene shifts to the country with Cecily and her fervid imagination (see images below).

She has a rope tied to a tree and suddenly Miss Prism arrives from behind her, calling her name. This fantasy ends, and she is attached to a pillar of the house. Miss Prism takes Cecily and they go together toward the table to carry on with their German lesson, but as soon as they are about to begin, Dr. Chasuble arrives, and he takes advantage of the situation pretending that Miss Prism has a headache.

Dr. Chasuble: Were I fortunate enough to be Miss Prism's pupil I would hang upon her lips. I spoke metaphorically. My metaphor was drawn from...bees.

Miss Prism: Ahem.

Dr. Chasuble: I shall, um...see you both, no doubt, at Evensong.

After that, in the original text, Miss Prism goes away with the Canon, but in Parker's filmic adaptation she does not—in fact, Miss Prism and Cecily continue their lesson. Henceforth, the scene is set once again in the town, the day after.

The situation is very stressful. Lady Bracknell is waiting for Ernest, but she is not alone. She is with two other women who signed all the answers that she posed to him and all replies. The text is the original one, but Aunt Augusta's attitude is completely different from Asquith—she is not so dangerous or critical towards Mr. Worthing—she is quite apprehensive until Ernest tells her that he was found in a handbag, in Brighton Line at Victoria Station. She overreacts, in fact she rips up the paper (see

image below) ending their conversation with “the line is immaterial, good morning Mr. Worthing.” without giving him a chance to explain.

Jack leaves the house and Lady Bracknell seems to have a light headache or a faint, and this is not at all the reaction that spectators expect her to have. Jack reaches Algernon and they drink something together— Ernest, in fact, wants to forget what has happened before trying to not think about Gwendolen as his mother, until she arrives. She asks quickly about Ernest’s address in the country, and to remain faithful both to the original text and to Asquith’s film, Algy signs the country address on his shirt-cuff.

Looking minutely at the image above, it can be noticed that Oliver Parker does not pay attention to details, since he does not put the pen in Algernon's hand.

There are some elements that are missing in the original text, for example when Ernest/Jack is really worried about his adoption and tries to find every possible indication in order to discover something about himself and his past. The scene moves on to Jack's house in Albany for some minutes when Jack takes on the role of the devastated man whose brother has died in Paris, until Algernon tries to come back home and is followed by his debtors as usual. The morning after, it is possible to see Algernon in a hot-air balloon going towards Hertfordshire in order to meet Cecily. Merriman delivers a note to Miss Cardew about Ernest's ar-

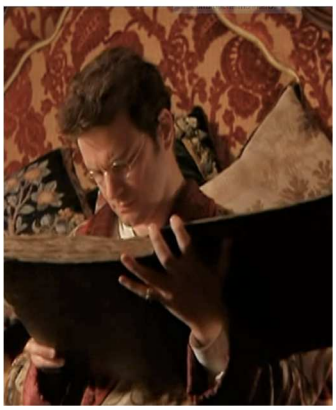
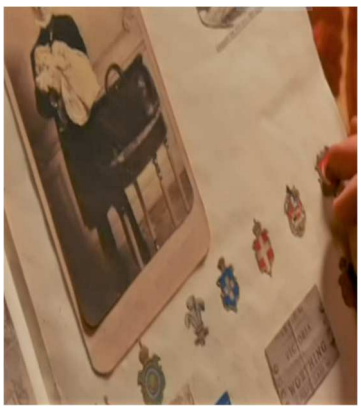
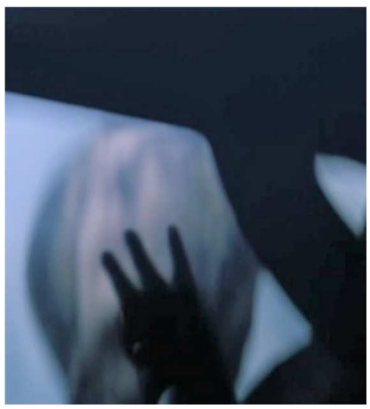
rival in the country and that he is waiting for her in the garden. Cecily receives him and at the same time imagines his horseman riding towards her—right now it is possible to think that maybe the knight that Cecily is probably her lover Ernest, Uncle Jack's brother.

Algernon and Cecily can finally meet. On the opposite side of the house, Mr Worthing arrives home with the ashes' vessel in his hands and Miss Prism with Dr. Chasuble calls him at the doorstep asking what has happened. Jack replies that his brother Ernest has died in Paris, as he had previously hatched with Algy, until Cecily's arrival immediately tells him that his brother Ernest is in the country and he is waiting for him at the other side of the house. Algy and Jack have the opportunity to stay

alone for a moment in the house and they start fighting until Miss Prism, Canon Chasuble and Cecily see them from the garden and both men begin to embrace each other pretending not to be notice by them. Then, the scene moves to the inside, where Cecily and Algy/Ernest are playing the piano together while Miss Prism controls them.

Algernon: You are the prettiest girl.

Hearing these words, Algernon tries to kiss Cecily, but suddenly Uncle Jack enters, and it is possible to listen to the buzzer sound in undertone. During the night, Jack is on the bed and continues to think about his past watching some photos in Thomas Cardew's album. This is the first moment in which Oliver Parker decides to use 'the stream of consciousness' as a cinematographic technique— found also in Cecily, but in a different way, because she is only an eighteen-year-old girl inclined to dreaming and imagination.

Jack, in fact, while watching his photos relives in his mind his childhood, the infant in the abandoned handbag, seeing a blurred image of a woman without knowing who she is.

Gwendolen sends a letter to Ernest in which she describes her feelings towards him; at the same time when Ernest is reading it, Gwendolen decides to go to a tattooist to have Ernest's name painted on her back and right after she jumps in the car to reach him in the country.

Gwendolen: The feelings you have aroused within me are at once delightful and exquisitely painful.

Algy is on a canoe with Miss Prism and Cecily who were technically following their lesson, until Laetizia falls asleep. Ernest is taking advantage of the situation and confesses his feelings to Miss Cardew until Ernest is called by Merriman because Mr. Grisby, one of his creditors, is waiting for him in the garden at the presence of Jack to imprison him.

It is funny to see how Algernon is pursued by debt solicitors even when disguised as Ernest. Oliver S. Buckton maintains that including the Grisby episode in the 2002 adaptation means to identify the hypothetic four-act version of the play, as the first Wildean intention.[96]

Another important element that emerges while Algy is playing the role of Ernest is the physical intimacy between the two men as they attempt to appear as brothers.[97] Jack, in fact, decides to help Algernon's payment of bills to the Savoy hotel, only if he goes to his dear friend Bunbury immediately because he is very sick. Thus, Algernon has no more chances to stay in the Manor House, but before departing he goes to Cecily to propose to her. At the same time, Algy uses Miss Prism as an excuse so that she leaves Cecily alone with Ernest and goes to Dr. Chasuble in the vestry as Algy has said before. The engagement between Cecily and Ernest is very faithful to the play. The only thing that changes is the introduction of Cecily's imagination but this time it is possible to give a face to the knight that is always present in her dreaming— he is Ernest. There are some gaps in their conversation which lead to a passing by between reality and Cecily's vision, that end with Merriman who stops their kiss (see images below).

[96] Ibid, p. 332.
[97] Ibid.

Coming back momentarily to Miss Prism, when she enters the vestry, she finds Canon looking at some drawings that he immediately puts downwhen she arrives. He seems to be agitated and a little frustrated, preferring to start the arrangement for Christenings. Miss Prism remains alone and decides to spy what Dr. Chasuble had been looking at right till that moment, and she discovers some paintings of her made by him.

Miss Fairfaix finally arrives and Cecily is waiting for her in the garden. While both ladies are talking, Algernon dog-cart left the house until when he jumps out the carriage and starts to run to come back to the Manor House. The fight between Gwendolen and Cecily is close to the orginal text. The first who arrives is Ernest as Algernon and shortly after Ernest as Jack comes too. Both women, when pronouncing their real

names start to fantasizing: Cecily rejects the embrace and the knight suddenly returns in the mind of the youngest but this time with the lowered helmet; Gwendolen re-thinks immediately of her tattoo (see images below).

Gwendolen: The gentleman who is now embracing you is my cousin. Mr. Algernon Moncrieff.

Cecily: Algernon? Moncrieff? […]

Gwendolen: Here is Ernest. Oh, my own Ernest.

Cecily: I knew there must be some misunderstanding Miss Fairfax. The man whose arm is at present around your waist is my guardian Mr. John Worthing.

Gwendolen: I beg your pardon?

Cecily: This is Uncle Jack.

The two ladies leave their respective companions in the garden. Algy eats muffins which might seem irrelevant, but it is a turning point

because since both in the first adaptation and also in the original play, Algernon eats continuously when he is nervous and this is probabily the first real scene in which he does it. After that, Jack begins to eat muffins with him. The two women walk into the living room, directly towards the window. Jack and Algy begin to quarrel with the dish of muffins in their hands. This scene appears really funny, until they stop since they realize they are being spied by Cecily and Gwendolen.

Jack goes to the church to ask Canon to celebrate his baptism in the afternoon; after a second Algernon appears for the same identical motivation. Subsequently the two men collect some flowers to bring to their women and they speak about their baptisms, until Gwendolen and Cecily riding horses near them get them both dirty of mud and they go away laughing.

The scene moves to the garden, with the two women on the terrace and Algy and Jack trying to attract their attention starting to sing, having some servants help them bringing out the piano, while Algy plays and sings it together with Jack who plays the guitar, and this is a song composed by Charlie Mole.

The western wind
is blowing fair
Across
the dark Aegean Sea
And at the secret
marble stair
My Tyrian galley
waits for thee

Come down.
the purple sail is spread
The watchman sleeps
within the town
O lady mine, come down
Come down
Dum dum dum dum
Lady, come

The two women seem however annoyed by their attitude because it disturbs their silence and go away slamming the window, while the two men keep on singing. They move inside the house to continue their reading, but the men keep on singing inside in order to catch their eyes.

Come down

Dum dum dum dum

Lady, come down

She will not come.

I know her well

Of lover's vows.

she hath no care

And little good

a man can tell

For one so cruel

and so fair

True love

is but a woman's toy

They never know

the lover's pain

And I who loved

as love's a boy

Must love in vain.

must love in vain

Come down

Lady, come down

Come down

Lady, come down

Lady, come down

While the two men sing, Cecily and Gwedolen go down the staircases

and interrupt the song asking them to answer some questions, implying that all decisions will depend on how they will reply.

Gwendolen and Cecily: Your Christian names are still an insuperable barrier.

Both men decide to confess to the two ladies that they will be baptised as Ernest in the afternoon.

Gwendolen and Cecily: Where questions of self-sacrifice are concerned…men are infinitely beyond us.

*Jack and Algernon:*We are.

Once the ladies realize their sacrifice, Merriman announces Lady Bracknell's arrival, who suddenly enters and finds the two couples embraced. Aunt Augusta orders to Gwendolen to shut it down and that all communication between Jack and her daughter must cease immediately. Aunt Augusta asks Algernon if Mr. Bunbury lives there and he answers that he is dead. Then, Lady Bracknell asks to Mr. Worthing who is the young woman with whom her nephew has an agreement.

Lady Bracknell: Indeed, when I married…Lord Bracknell, I had no fortune of any kind.

These words are an important turning point in Parker's cinematographic adaptation because both the Wildean text and Asquith's film do not take into consideration Lady Bracknell's background, so the spectator that

knows the story of *The Importance of Being Earnest* remains shocked to discover that Lady Bracknell was a pregnant dancer in a nightclub and that this is probably the reason why she married Lord Bracknell.

This part remains very faithful to the play, and it includes also some parts that, for instance, in Asquith's film are not dealt with, such as the monologue of Jack about Algernon.

Jack: I fear there can be no possible doubt about the matter. During my temporary absence in London...on an important question of romance...he obtained admission to my house...by means of the false pretence of being my brother. He then proceeded to win over...the affections of my only ward when his own intentions, I'm utterly convinced, were purely financial. Deny it if you dare. He subsequently stayed to tea and devoured every single muffin...and what makes his behaviour all the more heartless...is that he was perfectly aware from the start...that I have no brother,that I never had a brother...and that I don't intend to have a brother, not even of any kind.

After that, everything proceeds as the original text, in a faithful way but the setting is obviously different, because the characters move continuously from the inside to the outside of the Manor House. When Lady Bracknell refuses in some way the coalition between Gwendolen and John, Jack does not approve the marriage between Cecily and Algernon. This is the reason why Lady Bracknell is ready to ride in the carriage until Dr. Chasuble's arrival for Jack and Algy's baptisms. He is followed by a servant who tells him that Miss Prism is waiting for him in the vestry. Laetitia, in fact, is in the vestry looking at Canon's paintings. The scene seems almost idyllic and love is perceived in the air, but suddenly in a low voice Dr.Chasuble hears Lady Bracknell. She asks to go immediately to the vestry, and the scene moves there, unlike what happens in the original story. Lady Bracknell enters the church shouting "Prism", who upon hearing her voice escapes. She runs away and all characters follow both ladies until Miss Prism passes out and is brought to the terrace of the house. When she awakes, Lady Bracknell starts to speak with her reproducing the same stream of consciousness that Jack has in 2002 film— it can be seen that the police is investigating to find the baby until the perambulator was discovered at midnight, standing by itself in a remote corner of Bayswater.

Lady Brackenll tries to discover something about the identity of the baby, but she begins to describe what has really happened that day and the spectator is immediately transported in Prism's mind.

Jack as usual hides into the house to take the handbag in which the child had been found. All people follow him in the living room. After that, Parker's screenplay remains faithful. Mr. Worthing discovers to be Aunt Augusta's nephew and consequently Algernon's brother (Algy is on the back in the image above), but the only thing that changes is the age of the two men— in Asquith's film and so in Wilde's play, Jack is the older brother, whereas now he is the younger. When Jack and Algy discover to be brothers, they live out their relation. There is a funny moment after that revelation— Aunt Augusta asks the 'new' nephew to kiss her and all

characters begin to clap their hands. Another additional element is when Miss Prism wants to leave her work because of the situation, but Dr. Chasuble, before she leaves the house, calls her and asks her to marry him. The film ends with Jack finally discovering the 'vital importance of being Ernest' — the only difference is the suspense that Jack leaves to the spectator when he finds his real name in the Army Lists of the last forty years. Parker's Lady Bracknell, unlike Asquith's, is more pleasant, in fact she smiles throwing the book away while the other characters seem to represent what they imagine to be.




Immediately afterwards, in the end credits it is possible to find the protagonists going toward the cemetery to celebrate Bunbury's death with 'The Lady Comes Down' by Charlie Mole playing as musical background—the same song sung by Jack and Algy when trying to reconquer Cecily and Gwendolen. In the final scene Ernest John goes to the tattooist to paint Gwendolen's name on his back as she has done before.

CONCLUSIONS

At the end of this thesis work, it is necessary to give a sort of excursus about the importance of Oscar Wilde in the contemporary world, literature and cinema. Despite the problems related to his homosexuality, which led him to losing himself and his ‘life as a work of art’, his figure has never stopped being a source of inspiration for contemporary arts and cinema. In 2002, Oliver Parker deeply transforms Wilde’s original text of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, but the result is not quite deformed. The director re-reads the admirable anti-Victorian oral play with sincere love and a good dose of courage. Ample cuts were made in the dialogues, especially the most poisonous wisecracks, but the silences and the hints of the original work are explored with sensibility and sense of the tragi-comedian and the free game of the aphorisms does not clash in a context of sacred and profane. There are numerous references to Adam and Eve, to Perseus and Andromeda, to the loves of Venus and Mars. The setting seems to be Eden’s representation of most paintings by Botticelli, Klimt and Pre-Raphaelites. The direction of the actors is superlative, and some scene are indeed memorable: the fugitive prologue, the 'interview' orchestrated by Lady Bracknell, Jack's arrival in

the country, the serenade on texts of Wilde, the laughing conclusive stab. Not to lose the end credits, in which the most mysterious person of the whole play finally appears. On the contrary, the adamant perfection of the dated film of Anthony Asquith of 1952 has indeed dealt with the first advent of Technicolor and it endows the lines with charm in keeping up with the period. This adaptation is the very model of wit and whimsical that came so naturally in the 50's and comes so rarely today. There have been several versions, but this is truly the best, with no unnecessary scenes or added dialogue— just the exact words of the brilliant play. Every Wilde fan should be perfectly satisfied of that.

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