

Maxims and masks: the epigram in "the importance of being earnest"



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Oscar Wilde frames "The Importance of Being Earnest" around the paradoxical epigram, a skewering metaphor for the play's central theme of division of truth and identity that hints at a homosexual subtext. Other targets of Wilde's absurd yet grounded wit are the social conventions of his stuffy Victorian society, which are exposed as a "shallow mask of manners" (1655). Aided by clever wordplay, frantic misunderstanding, and dissonance of knowledge between the characters and the audience, devices that are now staples of contemporary theater and situation comedy, "Earnest" suggests that, especially in "civilized" society, we all lead double lives that force upon us a variety of postures, an idea with which the closeted (until his public charge for sodomy) homosexual Wilde was understandably obsessed. The play's initial thrust is in its exploration of bisexual identities. Algernon's and Jack's "Bunburys" initially function as separate geographic personas for the city and country, simple escapes from nagging social obligations. However, the homoerotic connotations of the punning name (even the double "bu"s, which serve mostly an alliterative purpose, insinuate a union of similarities, and "Bunbury" rhymes with "buggery," British slang for sodomy) flare up when paired with Algernon's repeated assaults on marriage: ALGERNON. "...She will place me next to Mary Farquhar, who always flirts with her own husband across the dinner table. That is not very pleasant. Indeed, it is not even decent ... and that sort of thing is enormously on the increase. The amount of women in London who flirt with their own husbands is perfectly scandalous. It looks so bad. It is simply washing one's clean linen in public" (1633). The mixed truth of a Wilde epigram - stating the normal in a ludicrous fashion, as with Algernon's aghast reaction to marital flirtation, and often capped by tweaking an established cliché, as <https://assignbuster.com/maxims-and-masks-the-epigram-in-the-importance-of-being-earnest/>

with "washing one's clean linen" - is not only humorous, but salient; his distaste for public displays of "clean" heterosexual affection implies his deep-seated resentment that his linen is considered dirty and must be washed in private. Though both men are "Bunburyists," Wilde holds and heightens dramatic tension through Jack's denial of the fact. The characters are given to hyperbolic conviction in their brief speeches, a fast-paced technique that magnifies the play's distant relationship to vaudevillian humor and reveals another duality within homosexuality; Algernon is perfectly happy to be gay, while Jack is repellent to the idea, perhaps even to the point of self-loathing. Algernon puns on the idiom "to part with," showing his reluctance to remove himself from both the world and the physically splitting position of homosexuality: "Nothing will induce me to part with Bunbury, and if you ever get married, which seems to me extremely problematic, you will be very glad to know Bunbury. A man who marries without knowing Bunbury has a very tedious time of it" (1634). Jack claims he is going to "kill [his] brother," conflating his sexual duality as all he will kill is a part of himself: "That is nonsense. If I marry a charming girl like Gwendolen, and she is the only girl I ever saw in my life that I would marry, I certainly won't want to know Bunbury" (1634). His confidence in Gwendolen as his only soul mate is an ordinary declaration of love in most plays; here, it intimates a fundamentally homosexual man who has "converted" to heterosexuality on this sole occasion. Wilde extends the duality of homosexuality to the female population, as Algernon points out Gwendolen's alternative to staid marriage: "Then your wife will. You don't seem to realize, that in married life three is company and two is none" (1634). Again, Wilde updates a preexisting aphorism ("Two's company, <https://assignbuster.com/maxims-and-masks-the-epigram-in-the-importance-of-being-earnest/>

three's a crowd") and applies it for his own subversive measures, simultaneously ridiculing two distinct cultural specimens, the clichéd love triangle of French drama and English marriage. The convergence of art and life in epigram is a pillar for Wilde that bases his observations in two lands, the aesthetic and the natural, and adds contemporaneity for his Victorian audience while maintaining universality for future performance. What must be a relatively universal puzzle for audience members is Algernon's cultish language to Jack: " Besides, now that I know you to be a confirmed Bunburyist, I naturally want to talk to you about Bunburying. I want to tell you the rules" (1633). These " rules," one can assume, are the unwritten codes of homosexuality, and since Algernon never gives the game away by explaining what they are, Wilde explodes another duality into the theater - which members of the audience " get it," and which are left in the dark. While Algernon and Jack codify Bunburying in defiance against the unassuming audience, Wilde deploys another character/audience duality: the comically dissonant effect of accenting the female characters' ignorance of a situation against the audience's knowledge of the truth. The meeting of Gwendolen and Cecily is a prime example of such farcical confusion, out of which Wilde mines material for the mercurial nature of female emotion. Gwendolen's opening lines foreshadow their problematic relationship, one born of disinformation of appellation and appearance, that plays against the audience's superior position: " Cecily Cardew? What a very sweet name! Something tells me that we are going to be great friends. I like you already more than I can say. My first impressions of people are never wrong" (1653). Her blindness to the circumstances is made physical through the use of a punning prop: " Cecily, mamma, whose views on education are remarkably <https://assignbuster.com/maxims-and-masks-the-epigram-in-the-importance-of-being-earnest/>

strict, has brought me up to be extremely short-sighted; it is part of her system; so do you mind my looking at you through my glasses?" (1653) Her weak grasp of the situation sets up more laughs, especially when she banishes any doubts of foul play: " Ernest has a strong upright nature. He is the very soul of truth and honor. Disloyalty would be as impossible to him as deception" (1654). Though deception is the more flagrant offense, the word disloyalty recalls his promiscuous Bunburying and brings us back to the binarism of sexuality. Once the women are officially at odds, Wilde is able to critique the Victorian politesse that often shadows ill will. In the absence of witnesses, a no-holds-barred fight progresses: " CECILY. This is no time for wearing the shallow mask of manners. When I see a spade I call it a spade. GWENDOLEN. [satirically] I am glad to say that I have never seen a spade. It is obvious that our social spheres have been widely different" (1655). In class-conscious England this is a devastating insult and, interestingly, it is " the presence of the servants [that] exercises a restraining influence, under which both girls chafe," as Wilde points out in the stage directions (1655). The juxtaposition of high and low classes farcically enacts a duality of social manners in which the women behave with a contempt for each other as saccharine as their snacks:" CECILY. ...May I offer you some tea, Miss Fairfax? GWENDOLEN. [with elaborate politeness] Thank you. [aside] Detestable girl! But I require tea! CECILY. [sweetly] Sugar? GWENDOLEN. [superciliously] No, thank you. Sugar is not fashionable any more. [CECILY looks angrily at her, takes up the tongs and puts four lumps of sugar into the cup.] (1655)And so on, until Gwendolen can no longer contain herself and reverses her previous intuition, shifting their relationship into a binarism of empathy/hatred: " From the moment I saw you I distrusted you. I felt you

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were false and deceitful. I am never deceived in such matters. My first impressions of people are invariably right" (1656). Through stage direction, Wilde makes more visible and immediate the women's reversals of emotion. In conversation with Cecily, Gwendolen sits down and stands up four times as her misgivings rise and fall. Even more exaggerated are the women's reactions when confronting the men. After she calls out " Ernest! My own Ernest!" Gwendolen withdraws; once Jack denies his engagement to Cecily, she offers her cheek for a kiss. Six lines later, Cecily tells her " Ernest"' s real name is Jack, and Gwendolen recedes yet again. Cecily goes through the same exact motions - retreat, kiss, retreat - with the same skeletal dialogue construction of " Thank you. You may" in response to a kiss, and "| I knew there must be some misunderstanding, Miss Fairfax/I felt there was some slight error, Miss Cardew.| The gentleman | whose arm is at present round your waist/who is now embracing you| is my | dear guardian, Mr. John Worthing/cousin, Mr. Algernon Moncrieff|" (1656). Both women respond to this disclosure with the exposed name followed by " Oh!" They ask the men about this in similar fashions, and both admit their deception. Wilde has merged, through word and action, the two women into a single unit and the men into another, and the vacillation of sympathy now comes to fruition as the women bond at the expense of the men:" CECILY. [to GWENDOLEN] A gross deception has been practiced on both of us. GWENDOLEN. My poor wounded Cecily! CECILY. My sweet wronged Gwendolen! GWENDOLEN. [slowly and seriously] You will call me sister, will you not? [They embrace. JACK and ALGERNON groan and walk up and down.]Their newfound sisterhood stands in ironic contrast to the falsified brotherhood of Algernon and Jack (which is, in the play's final irony, real), and the simultaneous groan

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and physical movement of the unified yet distraught men amplify the heightened pace and new friendship duality of the preceding interaction. As Jack concludes after the play's denouement, which again inverts the character/audience duality by revealing all first impressions as truthful when we always "knew" them to be false, "it is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth" (1667). It seems that facing one's true self is the most frightening occupation in Wilde's world. Wilde lightly mocks the flagrant social posturing of Victorian women, a world with which he was inextricably associated but from which he could just as easily distance himself via a pithy saying, but he treats the tension of homosexuality, his own mask, more seriously. Jack is never ready to admit his entrance into the Bunbury underworld, and we never learn from Algernon the necessary rules of conduct. The personification of homosexuality as a character's double is not surprising - some critics argue that Dr. Jekyll's evil counterpart, Mr. Hyde, has some homosexual leanings - as such a controversial and, perhaps, embarrassing topic can be more easily disguised and obscured in the murky depths of the doppelgänger tale. Today, with scientific evidence backing an opinion that places individuals' sexual preferences on a sliding scale from full heterosexuality to full homosexuality, the simple bifurcated view of sexuality in literature may soon be obsolete.