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The Importance of Being Playful

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Being earnest, being christened, not keeping a business engagement – all of this is said to be of vital importance in Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The very words “importance” and “important” are repeated again and again throughout the play,¹ but instead of revealing the importance of being serious, sincere and dedicated, this polyptoton debunks the notion of importance altogether. As Algernon suggests when he remarks: “What on earth you are serious about I haven’t got the remotest idea. About everything, I should fancy. You have such an absolutely trivial nature” (Act II, p. 44), emphasizing the importance of every single thing ultimately means being absolutely trivial about everything. *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Russell Jackson reminds us, was indeed Wilde’s “response to an American impresario’s request for a play ‘with no real serious interest’”; Jackson claims the play “lacks not only the ‘serious’ plot devices of the other Society plays, but also the grandiloquent speeches with which the characters rise to serious subjects in moments of crisis.”² Described by Wilde himself as “exquisitely trivial”³ and “written by a butterfly for butterflies,”⁴ it is hardly surprising that *The Importance of Being Earnest* has been said to depict a world of “pure play.”⁵ Nonetheless, in what follows, I will attempt to show that this pervasive playfulness conceals a discourse on authenticity and forgery, on the social agreement that lies at the source of what is deemed to be authentic, and ultimately, on the necessity to produce socially acceptable utterances.

¹ “I know, of course, how important it is not to keep a business engagement” (Act II, p. 28); “I must see him at once on a most important christening – I mean on most important business” (Act II, p. 37); “A Miss Fairfax has just called to see Mr. Worthing. On very important business, Miss Fairfax states.” (Act II, p. 38); “it is a matter of some importance to us to know where your brother Ernest is at present” (Act II, p. 43); “you have been christened. That is the important thing” (Act II, p. 6); “In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity is the vital thing” (Act III, 47); “This afternoon during my temporary absence in London on an important question of romance, he obtained admission to my house” (Act III, p. 52); “This matter may prove to be one of vital importance to Lord Bracknell and myself.” (Act III, p. 54); “Miss Prism, this is a matter of no small importance to me.” (Act III, p. 56); “I’ve now realised for the first time in my life the vital Importance of Being Earnest.” (Act III, p. 59)

² Jackson Russell, “*The Importance of Being Earnest*”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, Peter Raby (ed.), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 165.

³ Fineman Joel, “The Significance of Literature: *The Importance of Being Earnest*”, in *October*, Vol. 15, Winter 1980, p. 85.

⁴ Wilde Oscar, “Letter to Arthur L. Humphreys, February 1895”, in *Selected Letters of Oscar Wilde*, Rupert Hart-Davis (ed.), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1979, p. 128.

⁵ Gregor Ian, “Comedy and Oscar Wilde”, in *Sewanee Review*, Vol. 74, 1966, p. 512.

“He plays with everything: with wit, with philosophy, with drama, with actors and audience, with the whole theatre.”⁶ Although George Bernard Shaw’s comment refers to *An Ideal Husband*, and his subsequent critical response to *The Importance of Being Earnest* was far from as enthusiastic,⁷ it could be argued that it is also an adequate description of the 1895 play. Indeed, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, conventions of all sorts are played with, debunked and deconstructed. First, social conventions are toyed with. Family relationships, marriage, gender roles – nothing seems to be spared. If Jack realizes (albeit slightly late) that he should respect what Leech has defined as the Politeness Principle (which reads: “Minimize [...] the expression of impolite beliefs”⁸) when he corrects himself after complaining about Lady Bracknell in her nephew’s presence – “I beg your pardon, Algy, I suppose I shouldn’t talk about your own aunt in that way before you” (Act I, p. 20) – Algernon disagrees and invites Jack to maximize the expression of impolite beliefs, thereby reversing Leech’s maxim: “My dear boy, I love hearing my relations abused. It is the only thing that makes me put up with them at all” (Act I, p. 20). Lady Harbury’s husband’s death does not leave her bereft, contrary to what would be expected: “she looks quite twenty years younger” (Act I, p. 13), as Lady Bracknell puts it. She lives “entirely for pleasure now” (Act I, p. 13), and, quite astonishingly, “her hair has turned quite gold from grief” (Act I, p. 13). The expected “grey” becomes “gold” in Algernon’s mouth and the alliteration in /g/ further underlines the ironical connection between “gold” and “grief”. The paired words formulate an ironical statement which Lady Bracknell cannot fail to misunderstand, since she hints that the new colour may not have originated from grief: “It certainly has changed its colour. From what cause I, of course, cannot say” (Act I, p. 13). Wilde undermined the ideal of the “angel in the house” as encapsulated to perfection in Coventry Patmore’s eponymous narrative poem first published in 1854, though it was widespread at the end of the 19th century. He has Gwendolen express unconventional views on the role of men – “The home seems to me to be the proper sphere for the man” (Act II, p. 39) – and reveals through Lady Bracknell’s lines that even the man is not an angel in his (her) own house, as Lord Bracknell is used to dining upstairs (Act I, p. 13). Public and private spheres are thus inverted in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. While diaries are conventionally considered to be personal records of daily events and intimate thoughts, and consequently are not to be read by anyone but their authors, in Wilde’s 1895

⁶ Shaw George Bernard, “Two New Plays”, in *Oscar Wilde*, Harold Bloom (ed.), New York, Bloom’s Literary Criticism, 2008, p. 137.

⁷ See Shaw George Bernard, “On *The Importance of Being Earnest*”, in *The Importance of Being Earnest: Authoritative text, Backgrounds, Criticism*, Michael Patrick Gillepsie (ed.), New York: Norton, A Norton Critical Edition, 2006, p. 99-100.

⁸ Leech Geoffrey, *Principles of Pragmatics*, London; New York, Longman, 1983, p. 81.

play, when Algernon's expresses curiosity about Cecily's diary, she reaches the opposite conclusion from a very similar definition of what a diary is: "it is simply a very young girl's record of her own thoughts and impressions, and consequently meant for publication" (Act II, p. 35). The use of the word "consequently" establishes an unconventional link between the intimate sphere, as underlined by "her own," and the public sphere – the word "publication" etymologically meaning "making publicly known".⁹

All these examples show how Wilde plays not only with social conventions, but also with the hackneyed expression of social convention and, ultimately, the unreflexive use of language in general. Firstly, well-known sayings are parodied,¹⁰ so that the hypotext may easily be recognized under the hypertext and the co-presence of the two on the paradigmatic axis (if not on the syntagmatic axis¹¹) may trigger laughter. The proverbs "washing one's dirty linen in public" and "marriages are made in heaven" thus become "It is simply washing one's clean linen in public" (Act I, p. 11) and "[d]ivorces are made in Heaven" (Act I, p. 7) thanks to the paradigmatic substitutions of "dirty" for "clean" and "marriages" for "divorces"; the adage "two is company, three is a crowd" becomes "three is company and two is none" (Act I, p. 12) thanks to the syntagmatic substitution of "two" for "three" (and "three" for "two" in the last part of the utterance). Secondly, clichéd aphorisms and expressions are mocked, in two different ways. They are sometimes repeated in absurd contexts by ridiculous characters, as is the case of the Biblical phrase "as a man sows, so shall he reap" (or a variant of that phrase) which is mechanically spoken every time Miss Prism hears about Jack's brother (Act II, p. 25 and p. 30) – the second instance incongruously implying that "a severe chill" is an adequate retribution for a life of debauchery. In addition, their potential polysemy is reactivated, as is the case with the expression "to be on speaking terms," which conventionally means to be friendly with someone and often talk to them, and which Algernon demetaphorizes:

JACK Algy! Can't you recollect what our father's Christian name was?

⁹ According to Eric Partridge, "publication" obliquely stems for the late Latin noun *publicatio*, which itself is derived from *publicare*, meaning "to render public." See Partridge Eric, *Origins – A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English*, London and New York, Routledge, 1966, p. 2356.

¹⁰ Genette defines the term parody as the distortion of a text by means of minimal transformation. See Genette Gérard, *Palimpsestes*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1982, p. 40.

¹¹ In his *Cours de linguistique générale*, Ferdinand de Saussure distinguishes syntagmatic from associative relations (later called paradigmatic relations). While syntagmatic relations are based on linear sequence (in an utterance), associative (paradigmatic) relations rely on connections in the brain. Syntagmatic relations hold *in praesentia*; paradigmatic relations hold *in absentia*. See De Saussure Ferdinand, *Cours de linguistique générale*, Paris, Éditions Payot & Rivages, 1995 [1916], p. 170-175.

ALGERNON My dear boy, we were never even on speaking terms. He died before I was a year old. (Act III, p. 58)

If the expression is, in all likelihood, conventionally understood at first, Algernon's explanatory sentence – "He died before I was a year old" – unleashes the other (hitherto highly unlikely and unconventional) meaning: they never had the chance to talk together, since he passed away when Algernon was an infant. This shows how, even though a signifier is conventionally attached to one specific signified, the link between the two is not (and should not be considered to be) automatic. This idea is further emphasized by the play's central pun, which rests on the mechanical connection of the name "Ernest" and the homophonic (though not homographic) adjective "earnest," a connection constructed by Gwendolen and Cecily, who both declare that the name Ernest inspires "absolute confidence" (Act I, p. 15 and Act II, p. 37), as well as by Algernon, who conflates the two words when he rejects the idea that his friend's name is Jack:

ALGERNON You have always told me it was Ernest. I have introduced you to everyone as Ernest. You answer to the name of Ernest. You look as if your name was Ernest. You are the most earnest-looking person I ever saw in my life. (Act I, p. 9)

The shift from "You look as if your name was Ernest" to "the most earnest-looking person," which relies on a chiasmatic reordering of the words of the original sentence, plays with the phonic identity of the two words, giving the superficial impression that they are interchangeable when they are not – except in this farcical comedy of manners.

The unorthodox label "farcical comedy of manners" relates Wilde's play to other types of conventions, this time literary, which are characteristic of the Victorian melodrama. As Richard Foster has shown,¹² *The Importance of Being Earnest* can be designated neither as a farce, since the play relies first and foremost on witty dialogues rather than on farcical and improbable situations, nor as a comedy of manners since it does not display a realistic (if exaggerated) world. The play distorts "the simple laws of real life with melodramatic complications and improbably easy escapes from them," by resorting to parodies of "certain

¹² Foster Richard, "Wilde as Parodist: a Second Look at *The Importance of Being Earnest*", in *College English*, 18, 1956, p. 18-23.

standard characters, themes, and plot situations.”¹³ Indeed, as David Mayer points out, melodrama displays “emotional, rather than intellectual, answers to a world where explanations of why there is pain and chaos and discord are flawed or deeply and logically inconsistent”.¹⁴ It depicts a Manichean world “where forces of wickedness and goodness are in constant contention”¹⁵; Mayer further admits that “so stereotypical and morally defined are roles within the melodrama company that they can be burlesqued”¹⁶ – and Wilde’s play is a case in point. Clearly enough, the characters of Gwendolen and Cecily represent parodies of the typical naïve “ingénue.” The first proposal scene reveals how Gwendolen actually controls the exchange with Jack. Jack is a nervous suitor, who is at a loss for words and whose sentences can sometimes go round in circles – for example when he stutters: “ever since I met you I have admired you more than any girl . . . I have ever met since . . . I met you” (Act I, p. 15). Conversely, Gwendolen confidently expresses her feelings: “For me you have always had an irresistible fascination” (Act I, p. 15). Unsurprisingly, then, Jack asks for Gwendolen’s permission to propose to her, placing her in a position of power, notably through the deontic usage¹⁷ of the modal auxiliary “may”: “Well . . . may I propose to you now?” (Act I, p. 16). Similarly, the supposedly innocent Cecily declares, much to Algernon’s and the audience’s astonishment, that she hopes he “ha[s] not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time. That would be hypocrisy.” (Act II, p. 27) According to Foster,

With this the wit has passed from Algernon to Cecily, and he never regains it at any time when she is on the scene. [...] [T]he rake is a fake, girlish innocence is the bait of a monstrous mantrap, the wages of sin is matrimony.¹⁸

Cecily does not fall prey to a devious Algernon, and is not moved to tears – to say the least – by her suitor’s proposal. While Algernon’s profession of love sounds artificial and gives the impression that Algernon is reciting lines, Cecily is no dupe and even questions his choice of words:

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹⁴ Mayer David, “Encountering melodrama”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Edwardian and Victorian Theatre*, Kerry Powell (ed.), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 148.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

¹⁷ F. R Palmer defines deontic modality thus: “deontic modality relates to obligation or permission, emanating from an external source”. Palmer F. R, *Mood and Modality*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 9.

¹⁸ Foster Richard, “Wilde as Parodist”, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

ALGERNON Cecily, ever since I first looked upon your wonderful and incomparable beauty, I have dared to love you wildly, passionately, devotedly, hopelessly.

CECILY I don't think that you should tell me that you love me wildly, passionately, devotedly, hopelessly. Hopelessly doesn't seem to make much sense, does it? (Act II, p. 35)

What's more, her only reaction to Algernon's actual proposal is: "You silly boy! Of course. Why, we have been engaged for the last three months" (Act II, p. 36). Algernon is no disquieting figure, but a mere "silly boy," and his proposal is dismissed as trivial, since Cecily considers that she already answered that question three months before. The stock character of the fallen woman is also made fun of in the mock scene of anagnorisis at the end of the play:

MISS PRIM The bag is undoubtedly mine. I am delighted to have it so unexpectedly restored to me. It has been a great inconvenience being without it all these years.

JACK (*In a pathetic voice.*) Miss Prism, more is restored to you than this hand-bag. I was the baby you placed in it.

MISS PRISM (*Amazed.*) You?

JACK (*Embracing her.*) Yes . . . mother!

MISS PRISM (*Recoiling in indignant astonishment.*) Mr. Worthing! I am unmarried.

JACK Unmarried! I do not deny that is a serious blow. But after all, who has the right to cast a stone against one who has suffered? Cannot repentance wipe out an act of folly? Why should there be one law for men, and another for women? Mother, I forgive you. (*Tries to embrace her again.*)

MISS PRISM (*Still more indignant.*) Mr. Worthing, there is some error. (*Pointing to LADY BRACKNELL.*) There is the lady who can tell you who you really are. (Act III, p. 56-57)

Even though the stage directions indicate that Jack speaks "in a pathetic voice," this scene relies on the farcical reversal of all the expectations of a recognition scene. The "mother" is far more enthusiastic about retrieving her lost handbag than a lost child, and she refuses to recognize "her son." She literally flees from Jack's arms and rejects his forgiveness. Finally, though Jack plays the role of the perfect gentleman, ready to discard strict Biblical morals and to forgive an erring mother, not only does he ignore all the signs indicating he may be committing an error when inferring that Miss Prism is his mother, but he invents a connection where there may not necessarily be one. Indeed, neither Lady Bracknell nor Miss Prism ever

uses a possessive article when referring to the misplaced baby.¹⁹ It is thus impossible at that stage to be sure who the baby's mother is, so that the conclusion that Miss Prism is Jack's mother relies on an erroneous metonymical displacement from an object, the handbag, to its owner, Miss Prism. This mock-recognition scene transforms the last scene of *The Importance of Being Earnest* into a comedy of errors, which playfully debunks the staples of the melodramatic genre.

The way Wilde plays with structures also involves the structure of the play itself. *The Importance of Being Earnest* largely relies on doubles and echoes to ensure that the reader or spectator will ignore the fact that the central echo of the play (pretending to be Ernest / being Ernest) is actually misleading. On the diegetic level, the theme of doubles is exploited in various ways, as the young male characters have invented doubles, and the young female characters are themselves doubles. While Jack has invented Ernest, Algernon has invented Bunbury. This parallel is underlined by the following parallelism of structure:

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 the country whenever I choose. (Act I, p. 11)

The construction of the two sentences is exactly the same, the only differences residing in the shifters (You / I) and the directions taken by Jack and Algernon for their secret excursions. A similar echo is constructed between Gwendolen and Cecily, who both idealize the name Ernest and are engaged (or so they think) to someone called Ernest. Even though one lives in London and the other in the country, the two young women are two sides of the same coin, which is made particularly obvious in the second scene of the third act:

GWENDOLEN Then you think we should forgive them?

CECILY Yes. I mean no.

GWENDOLEN True! I had forgotten. There are principles at stake that one cannot surrender. Which of us should tell them? The task is not a pleasant one.

CECILY Could we not both speak at the same time?

¹⁹ "Where is that baby?"; "a baby of the male sex"; "the baby was not there"; "the baby" (Act I, p. 55)

GWENDOLEN An excellent idea! I nearly always speak at the same time as other people. Will you take the time from me?

CECILY Certainly. (GWENDOLEN *beats time with uplifted finger.*)

GWENDOLEN and CECILY (*Speaking together.*) Your Christian names are still an insuperable barrier. That is all! (Act III, p. 47-48)

The word order of Gwendolen's yes-no question is that of an assertion, which reveals that this is what Dwight Bolinger has called a conducive question, i.e., a question which favours one answer over the other.²⁰ And indeed, Cecily gives the expected answer – “Yes” – before correcting herself. This epanorthosis does not introduce any dissension between them though, as Gwendolen hastily agrees with Cecily. The stage directions finally underline the perfect coordination between the two young women, who do not only always end up agreeing with each other, but also use the same words and speak at the same pace.

Furthermore, many scenes mirror each other in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The courtship scenes between Jack and Gwendolen (Act I, p. 14-16) and between Algernon and Cecily (Act II, p. 35-37) are uncannily alike. The male suitors begin their courting traditionally, by paying compliments to their loved ones; the young women react unconventionally, which astonishes the male suitors – as is made clear in the stage directions: “JACK *looks at her in amazement*” (Act I, p. 16) and “ALGERNON *Somewhat taken aback*” (Act II, p. 35) – and explain how they fell in love with “Ernest.” Both scenes then move on to the question of the name “Ernest” and include Freudian slips concerning the need to be christened: “I must get christened at once – I mean we must get married at once” (Act I, p. 15); and “I must see him at once on a most important christening – I mean on most important business” (Act II, p. 37). The scenes where Jack and Algernon break the news about Ernest's and Bunbury's recent deaths are also worth comparing. Algernon spontaneously announces Bunbury's death and consequently does not have a ready answer to Lady Bracknell's question about his “invalid friend” (Act III, p. 49). His replies are composed of one epanorthosis after the other, meant to hide his previous lies:

ALGERNON Bunbury doesn't live here. Bunbury is somewhere else at present. In fact, Bunbury is dead. [...] Oh! I killed Bunbury this afternoon. I mean poor Bunbury died this afternoon. [...] Oh, he was quite exploded. [...] I mean he was found out. The doctors

²⁰ Bolinger Dwight, *Interrogative Structures of American English: The Direct Question*, University, Al., University of Alabama Press, 1957, p. 97.

found out that Bunbury could not live, that is what I mean – so Bunbury died. (Act III, p. 49)

The seven repetitions of the name Bunbury in so few lines reinforce the comic effect of this revelation: Bunbury has never been so present than at this moment when his death is announced. Conversely, Jack was determined to put an end to his fictional brother. Accordingly, his announcement is carefully orchestrated:

(Enter JACK slowly from the back of the garden. He is dressed in the deepest mourning, with crape hat-band and black gloves.) [...]

JACK *(Shakes MISS PRISM's hand in a tragic manner.)* I have returned sooner than I expected. [...]

CHASUBLE Dear Mr. Worthing, I trust this garb of woe does not betoken some terrible calamity?

JACK My brother.

MISS PRISM More shameful debts and extravagance?

CHASUBLE Still leading his life of pleasure?

JACK *(Shaking his head.)* Dead!

CHASUBLE Your brother Ernest dead?

JACK Quite dead. (Act II, p. 30)

His slow gait, his hat-band, his black clothes, the tragic way he shakes hands – all evoke mourning. Yet, Chasuble (who should be used to interpreting such signs) does not infer that someone died, but follows Miss Prism's cue. Jack has then no choice but to explicitly lie and declare his brother dead. As Chasuble's incredulity increases, Jack reaffirms Ernest's death, using the scalar adverb "quite," when it is absolutely impossible to be "a little dead," inadvertently adding humour to his "tragic" announcement. The two scenes share another, more obvious kind of humour, which derives from the two older women's reactions to the news that Ernest and Bunbury have died. Miss Prism and Lady Bracknell both believe, indeed, that all events can serve as lessons to the people who experience them – even, absurdly enough, when the event in question is death.²¹

²¹ Act II, p. 30: "What a lesson for him! I trust he will profit by it." and Act III, p. 49: "he is well punished for his morbidity."

The last type of echo in *The Importance of Being Earnest* is elicited by a play on what John Langshaw Austin has called performative language. In the first four chapters of *How To Do Things With Words*,²² Austin establishes a distinction between what he calls constatives, i.e., utterances that speakers pronounce in order to state or describe something (such as “The table is brown”), and performatives, i.e., utterances thanks to which speakers can perform actions (e.g., “I declare this meeting adjourned”). In Wilde’s play, even though there is no intrinsic relationship between the utterance and the performing of the action referred to in the utterance in question (characters don’t “do things with words”), the impression is given that when something is said, it will turn out to be true. In other words, mock-performatives are scattered throughout the play. For instance, shortly after Cecily claims: “Miss Prism has just been complaining of a slight headache” (Act II, p. 26), Miss Prism declares: “I find I have a headache after all” (Act II, p. 27), even though she had denied this was the case a few lines earlier. Similarly, Jack argues that Cecily and Gwendolen are sure to be “extremely great friends” and even “call[...] each other sister,” and Algernon retorts: “Women only do that when they have called each other a lot of other things first” (Act I, p. 22). In the second act, this proves to be true: the two young girls start by being very friendly (Act II, p. 38), then level cutting remarks at each other when they realize that they are engaged to the same “Ernest” (or so they think) (Act II, p. 40-42), and end up calling each other sister (Act II, p. 43), as predicted by Jack and Algernon. Cecily also anticipated her engagement with Ernest, and shows no surprise when her fiction becomes reality (Act II, p. 36). Consequently, the reader and spectator of *The Importance of Being Earnest* are willing to accept that by calling oneself Ernest one will end up in effect, actually being E(a)rnest, or to use Joel Fineman’s words, that by the end of the play, Jack-Ernest will “discover [...] the unicity of his duplicity.”²³

In *The Limits of Interpretation*, Eco addresses the question of fakes and forgeries and proposes a classification of fakes. He also sheds new light on the concepts of originality and authenticity, identity and difference by arguing that, even though there are criteria, deemed satisfactory, to make correct authentications of documents through the evaluation of different types of proofs (proofs through material support,²⁴ proofs through linear manifestation,²⁵

²² The rest of the book is devoted to showing how there is, after all, no such clear-cut distinction and how speakers always “do things with words”, hence his focus on “speech acts”.

²³ Fineman Joel, “The Significance of Literature”, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

²⁴ “A document is a fake if its material support does not date back to the time of its alleged origin.” Eco Umberto, *The Limits of Interpretation*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994 [1990], p. 193.

proof through content²⁶ and proof through external evidence²⁷), these criteria are “theoretically weak.”²⁸ A skilled forger could, arguably, forge a perfect fake, that is to say use the proper material support, conform to the proper normative rules of writing (or painting and so on) and to the proper semantic structure of the cultural milieu of the alleged author, and refrain from referring to any external facts that could not have been known at the time of the production of the alleged original, and there would be no way to know for sure whether the document in question is a fake or an original. However, as Eco puts it,

Despite this [...], we usually rely on reasonable conjectures on the grounds of some balanced evaluation of the various tests. Thus, we cast in doubt the socially accepted authenticity of an object only when some contrary evidence comes to trouble our established beliefs. Otherwise, one should test the *Mona Lisa* every time one goes to the Louvre, since without such an authenticity test there will be no proof that the *Mona Lisa* seen today is indiscernibly identical with the one seen last week.

[...] [S]uch a test would be necessary for every judgment of identity. [...] However, [...] we rely on certain instinctive procedures mainly based on social agreement.²⁹

Eco then points out that authenticity does not, in the end, rely on objective criteria but on general consensus. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, “Ernest” is what Eco labels a “deliberate ex-nihilo forgery,”³⁰ a creation/Ob, that Jack wants everybody to think is an original/Oa.³¹ By the end of Act III, the reader and the spectator (and all the characters) are ready to believe that Ernest/Ob was not a forgery after all, but a long-lost original/Oa.

²⁵ “The Linear Text Manifestation of a document must conform to the normative rules of writing, painting, sculpting, and so on, holding at the moment of its alleged production.” *Ibid.*, p. 194.

²⁶ “For such proofs it is necessary to determine whether the conceptual categories, taxonomies, modes of argumentation, iconological schemes, and so on, are coherent with the semantic structure (the form of the content) of the cultural milieu of the alleged authors – as well as with the personal conceptual style of these authors (extrapolated from their other works).” *Ibid.*, p. 195.

²⁷ “a document is a fake if the external facts reported by it could not have been known at the time of its production.” *Ibid.*, p. 196.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

³⁰ Thus defined by Eco: “The Claimant knows that Oa [meaning the original] does not exist. If the Claimant coincides with the author B, then the Claimant knows that Ob [meaning the fake] is of recent manufacture. In any case the Claimant cannot believe that Oa and Ob are the same. Nevertheless, the Claimant claims, fully aware that he or she is not entitled to do so, that the two objects – one real and one imaginary – are identical or that Ob is genuine, and does so with the intention to deceive.” *Ibid.*, p. 187.

³¹ At the end of the chapter, Eco explains that not only works of art can be forged, but so can people: “it is very rare for a human being or a building to be forged (the rare exceptions to this rule are interesting subject matter only for detective stories or science fiction). But, in principle, John is no more difficult to forge than the *Mona Lisa*; on the contrary, it is easier to disguise successfully a person than to copy successfully the *Mona Lisa*.” *Ibid.*, p. 200.

However, while Ernest John Moncrieff has a brother (Algernon), Ernest/Ob does not have any brother when he is in London and he is known as Jack's brother in Hertfordshire – Jack being “a notorious domesticity for John” (Act I, p. 15): the fiction told by Jack and the final version of Jack's story are not compatible. In other words, there is definitely some evidence showing that Ernest/Ob is not identical to Ernest John/Oa. Everybody nonetheless seems to accept that Ernest/Ob is, after all, “naturally” (Act III, p. 58), Ernest John/Oa: they are eager to accept the authenticity of the forgery despite the inconsistency between the two versions.³² Thus, the final lines of Wilde's play suggest that authenticity relies on social agreement when there is no contrary evidence, but also when there is contrary evidence, as long as the community chooses to ignore the evidence in question.

Jack's final statement – “I've now realised for the first time in my life the vital Importance of Being Earnest” (Act III, p. 59) – conceals, then, the vital importance of producing socially acceptable utterances, which do not necessarily reflect the truth, or even conventions or traditions, but which the community the speaker belongs to will readily accept as valid. In this sense, *The Importance of Being Earnest* subtly promotes similar ideas to the ones Wilde (through Vivian's character) expressed in “The Decay of Lying.” In this essay, Vivian deplors the decay of lying, particularly in art, and promotes “the telling of beautiful untrue things.”³³ This definition of lying reveals, however, that what really matters is not the truth-value (or “untruth-value”) of the utterances. Indeed, as Vivian puts it, the liar knows “the secret that Truth is entirely and absolutely a matter of style” and “the aim of the liar is simply to charm, to delight, to give pleasure.”³⁴ What really matters is the aesthetic value of the utterances and their capacity to win over the addressee. The recurrent playful reversals of social, linguistic and literary conventions in *The Importance of Being Earnest* can, in this respect, be interpreted as Wilde's strategy to charm the play-going public by forging socially acceptable (because beguiling) utterances – a strategy which was extremely successful.

³² Declan Kiberd argues that Jack lies so well “that the truth conforms to his fiction.” See Kiberd Declan, “Oscar Wilde: The Resurgence of Lying,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, Peter Raby (ed.), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 280. The truth actually remains the same (and different from his fiction), but Jack's lies are accepted as truthful.

³³ Wilde Oscar, “The Decay of Lying”, in *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, Merlin Holland (ed.), Glasgow, HarperCollins, 2003 [1948], p. 1091.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1081.