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to ampio della popolazione. Tutti i prodotti di qualità del paese-Italia sono
mente il risultato del lavoro di minoranze, a cominciare dal marchio Ferrari.
ella è l’eccezione. Potremmo dire – con il gusto della provocazione – che
to vale, paradossalmente, nel bene e nel male, per la Ferrari ma anche per le
ne Rosse. Il sequestro Moro (dal massacro di cinque uomini di scorta che la
irascolosamente indenne il politico, all’intera gestione dell’affaire nel 15 gior-
prigionia) è tale dimostrazione di geometria potenza da avere indotto (a tor-
sospetto di una regia di servizi segreti stranieri. Come dire che tanta efficien-
za può appartenere all’Italia spagnrerta di sempre.
la volevo anche dire che è impressionante – leggendo Sanudo – lo scarto fra
luttà dell’occhio e il misuratissimo appagamento del cervello. Il teatro non è
drammatico (che, come tale, non strappa nessuna considerazione al diari-
beneo sempre e solo visione, godimento dello sguardo (per l’apparato sceno-
co, i costumi, la gestica, le danze ecc.). Né si tratta solo del buon Marino Sa-
no. Il coltissimo Baldassar Castiglione recente in una sua lettera famosa la pri-
apparizione della Calandria, ma parla per pagine e pagine della trasfor-
one subita dalla sala del palazzo ducale per ospitare lo spettacolo, della sce-
aia, dei quattro intermezzi (ripieni di musiche canti danze mimi sfilate di car-
.: ) e nulla dice del testo. Certo, è la sensibilità cortigiana che privilegia, natu-
,r, il ceto estetizzante, la dimensione idealistica, ma la corte del Seicento fran-
erede legittima della cultura classicista del Rinascimento italiano, sa dispiega-
accanto alle delizie dei sensi, e al giusto apprezzamento delle veline dell’epo-
anche una robusta riflessione intellettuale sui nodi che l’intelligenza scomoda
vo Cornelle, dei suoi Molière, dei suoi Racine propongono alla ribalta. Nulla-
simile, invece, nel Palazzo del Principe del nostro primo Cinquecento: nè di-
ta la drammaturgia di Ruzante nè dinanzi agli isolati ma assoluti capolavori
Mandrakola di Machiavelli o della Lena di Ariosto. In terra italiana, allora e
’ottica delle veline resta prevalente, dominante ed esaustiva.

Oscar Wilde wrote the first draft of *The Importance of Being Earnest* during Au-
gust and September 1894, while he was on holiday with his family in the town of
Worthing (hence the surname of its protagonist, Jack/Ernest Worthing). Wilde
was under economic pressure at the time, as his letters show. In July 1894, he had
began to tempt George Alexander, the actor-manager of the St James’s Theatre,
with the promise of a play, *an amusing thing* with a *slight plot* and *lots of fun
and wit*, which would soon write in exchange for an advance of money. Receiv-
ing no answer and thinking that Alexander might consider the work too farcical,
Wilde sent him a preliminary scheme for another play, a *modern comedy-drama*
which would certainly be more suitable to the public and the repertoire of the St
James’s. As Alan Bird suggests, it is likely that the *amusing thing* was *The
Importance of Being Earnest*, while the more serious play was the never written
*Mr and Mrs Davenport*. Despite Alexander’s cool reception, once *The Importance of
Being Earnest* was completed Wilde submitted the first copy to him at the end of Oc-
tober, after having sent the manuscript for typing to Mrs Marshall’s typesetting
agency. Its provisional cover title was *Lady Lancing*.  

George Alexander had gone into management in 1889. Two years later he took
the St James’s Theatre, building up its reputation for stylish and accomplished pro-
duction of well-written plays. He ran the St James’s until his death in 1915 and be-

1. In act 1, Jack explains to Lady Bracknell that he is a foundling. He was adopted by Mr Thomas
Cardew, who found him at Victoria Station, London. Mr Cardew had a first-class ticket for Worthing
on his pocket, so he later decided to give Jack this surname. Worthing is a seaside resort in Sussex.
3. See Introduction, in O. Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, edited by R. Jackson, E. Benn,
Vision 1980, p. xxv: «The new serious play was never written by Wilde, although Frank Harris lat-
ter wrote up a drama, *Mr and Mrs Davenport*, along the lines indicated in the proposals»
ill-known for his skilful and subtle acting as well as his meticulous stage direction, as Russell Jackson reports:

Biographer, the playwright and novelist A. E. Mason, described Alexander's work on his own plays. The manager went through the script line by line and moved by questioning him rigorously on every sentence, and planning moves with a toy in hand. Then a ground cloth was marked with the lines of walls and exits for weeks there were daily rehearsals, beginning each day punctually at eleven and going at two, until for the last four days there were morning and afternoon sessions, lasting in two dress rehearsals. The management's attention to detail in staging and performance was thorough.

nights at the St James's were like a brilliant party, pervaded with the atmosphere of fashionable occasions. But they were never so exclusive as to be withdrawn from the audience, who kept their privilege of expressing immediate and vehement opinion on what was put on the stage, as was the case for the disastrous production of Henry James's Guy Domville on 5 January 1895. The relations between the actor-manager and the playwright were unhappy due in particular to the many changes to the text suggested by the manager during rehearsals. It is no accident that Wilde had his next two comedies produced at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket, by two other managers, Auerbach and Berbohm (A Woman of No Importance, premiered on 19 April 1895; and An Ideal Husband, premiered on 3 January 1895). But Wilde's financial difficulties were probably the reason behind his attempt to other play with Alexander.

his initial hesitation, two facts convinced Alexander to put The Importance of Being Earnest on stage: on 3 January 1895 Wilde's An Ideal Husband had a triumphant run at the Haymarket Theatre and two days later Henry Guy Domville had proved an instant failure at the St James's. Alexander, I found a taker for Wilde's farcical comedy in actor-manager Charles Wyndham, who succeeded in having the play back. The comedy was released by Wyndham's condition that he had the option on Wilde's next play. Alexander agreed with condition that the subject of this reservation should not be Mr and Mrs Jessamy.

Importance of Being Earnest: A Trivial Comedy for Serious People or, as described it, a play written by a butterfly for butterflies, opened on the night of 14 February 1895. London was enduring a long spell of cold weather and several theatres advertised their steam-heating among the attractions of their programme. The first night of Wilde's comedy had already been put off from 12 February because several of the women in the cast had bad colds. With Alexander as John Worthing, Allan Ayresworth as Algernon Moncrieff, Irene Vanbrugh as Gwendolen Fairfax, and Rose Leclercq as Lady Bracknell, it was a resounding triumph from the very beginning to the end. Years later Allan Ayresworth told Wilde's biographer Hesketh Pearson:

In my fifty-three years of acting, I never remember a greater triumph than the first night of The Importance of Being Earnest. The audience rose in their seats and cheered and cheered again. In general the critics were equally enthusiastic and the whole of London, social, literary, frivolous and serious, agreed that there was not a more amusing evening to be spent anywhere than at the St James's Theatre.

Wilde now had two plays running successfully at different theatres, money pouring in and a brilliant future as a playwright. Nobody could imagine that his career would collapse a few months later in the witness box of the Queensberry libel trial.

As originally drafted by Wilde in August-September 1894, the play was in four acts. Exercise books containing a fair copy in Wilde's autograph have survived and are divided between the Arents Tobacco Collection at New York Public Library (Acts I and II) and the British Library (Acts III and IV). But the comedy premiered on 14 February 1895, and later published in 1899, was reduced to three acts. Of the four stages of revision between the manuscript and the reduction, the typescripts now in the Arents and Frohm Collection are the only evidence editors can rely on. The text submitted for licensing to the Lord Chamberlain's office in January 1895, under the title of Lady Lancing, was the first official three-act version of the play. Lady Bracknell was called Lady Lancing on the cover, but Lady Brancaster inside. Algernon's surname was Montford, not Moncrieff. Interestingly, the subtitle was A Serious Comedy for Trivial People instead of the one later used for publication: A Trivial Comedy for Serious People. The play was subject to more changes in the course of rehearsal, as shown by the typescript owned by Alexander (today in Virginia).
draft to Algernon’s financial difficulties, which seem to be alluded to and mocked by the paradoxical situation he has to face as Ernest. In fact, in the draft Algernon’s debts are far more pressing than in later versions. In the opening scene of Act i he is besieged by creditors—a wine-merchant and a tailor—so much so that he explains: “Wish to goodness some ass would leave me a large fortune. Can’t go on as I am going on now. It is ridiculous”18. It is likely that Wilde first thought of making the need for a fortune into a motivation for Algernon’s pursuit of Jack’s young ward. The topic of Algernon’s debts is reinforced by Lady Bracknell’s comment, shortly after her entrance in Act i: “Of course I never mention anything about them [your debts] to your uncle. Indeed, as you know, I never mention anything to him at all”19. This and many other references to Algernon’s debts were removed at an early stage in revision. In the three-act version, the only reference to Algernon’s debts is at the beginning of Act ii when the butler Lane presents several letters on a salver which are supposed to be bills and he tears them up (p. 45). And the mercenary attitude of Algernon highlighted in the draft is later moved onto Lady Bracknell, whose view of Cecily’s eligibility is definitely affected by her fortune.

Beside Mr Gribby in the above-mentioned scene, another minor character who disappears is Moulton the gardener. At the beginning of Act ii in the draft, Cecily asks him if he would like to take the German lesson in her place but he declines (‘I don’t hold with your furrin tongues miss’ and disappears behind the hedge. Three further lines appear in the draft only. In the standard version he is just referred to by Mrs Prism at the very beginning of Act ii. Apart from Alexander’s insistence on the reduction of the acts from four to three, these changes may also account for Wilde’s will to avoid stock characterisation and remove slang or vogue-words from the play in order to limit cliché and farcical exaggeration, as suggested by Jackson20. Algernon’s debts would recall the usual life-style of the many-town character. Moulton would appear as the threadbare comic rustic of traditional English drama and his language would clash with the refined linguistic universe of a “pure verbal opera”, in W. H. Auden’s words21, in which all characters express themselves in well-formed complete sentences like their creator. If a minor character like the butler Lane has survived the cuts, it is because he escapes the stock type of the traditional scheming servant in his being unconventional, refined, witty and paradoxical—that is, “Wildean”.

Alexander’s pressure for a shorter play resulted in an increased dramatic unity and a quicker pace. Here are some examples of how the dialogue was made more effective by Wilde’s cuts and revisions to conform to Alexander’s request. In Act i, soon after Lady Bracknell’s exit, Jack unburdens himself to Algernon about the disappointing result of his formal proposal to Lady Bracknell and harshly criticises her. Here is Algernon’s reply to Jack in the standard version:

20. Introduction, iv, p. XXXIX.
GERNON. My dear boy, I love hearing my relations abused. It is the only thing that makes me put up with them at all. Relations are simply a tedious pack of people, who won’t get the remotest knowledge of how to live, and the smallest instinct about when to die (lines 617-5, p. 33).

The manuscript draft Algernon’s answer is much longer. He adds a few paragraphs of his family (Mary Farquhar, Gladys, and Lord Brackaster – uncle Geo) who “isn’t half a bad sort in his silly way, considering what a thoroughly typical woman Aunt Augusta is”). He also offers another definition of Relations, which seems less efficacious than the one in the standard version: “Relations never do one credit, and won’t give one credit, even for genius. They are a sort of venerated form of the public”.

Act II Chasuble explains what baptism by immersion is. The first quotation is the current standard version – essential, concise and definitely better ordered than the longer version in the manuscript, reported in the second quotation.

CHASUBLE. You need have no apprehensions. Sprinkling is all that is necessary, or indeed I think advisable. Our weather is so changeable. At what hour would you wish the ceremony performed? (line 285, p. 54)

CHASUBLE. Oh no. You need have no apprehension. That form of ritual, strangely enough, is now confirmed to certain religious bodies not in direct communion with us. Sprinkling is all that is necessary, or indeed, I think advisable. Our weather is so changeable there is great mortality amongst the Baptists. At what hour would you wish the ceremony performed?

The following passage in italics uttered by Lady Brackaster in Act III, when Jack estioring Miss Prism about the handbag, shows Wilde’s immense inventive which however had to be sacrificed for the economy of the text. It appears in the draft and licensing office and was struck out later. The cut of Lady Brackaster’s hilarious comment speeds up the rhythm of the scene:

MISS PRISM. [...] In a moment of mental abstraction, for which I never can forgive myself, I deposited the manuscript in the bassinet, and placed the baby in the handbag. CH. But where did you deposit the handbag?

LADY BRACKASTER. I do not see how that can matter now. It was, I suppose, left at the offices of one of those publishers who do not return rejected contributions unless accompanied by stamps. With your usual carelessness, Prism, I suppose you never dreamed of putting stamps with the baby. That unfortunate child is probably at the present moment lying in the waste-paper basket of some large commercial house.

MISS PRISM. Do not ask me, Mr. Worthing. (lines 399-64, pp. 98-9)

See Appendix iv, in Wilde, The Importance of Being Earnest, cit., p. 119.

On top of Wilde’s revisions, Alexander made alterations further improving the brilliant pace of the comedy and showing his meticulous staging. Some of them were later dropped by Wilde in his correction of the page proofs for the Smithers edition. Alexander changed Jack’s age from twenty-five (as in the draft) to thirty-five, since he himself was thirty-six when the play was first performed. In the draft, before the famous dialogue between Jack and Lady Brackaster on Jack’s credentials in Act I, Jack pulls out a cigarette case from his pocket, opens it and takes a cigarette, but Lady Brackaster’s sharp glance makes him give it up. This stage direction was never adopted in further versions, on the ground that it would be unmanly for a man to smoke in the presence of a lady. At the end of Act I Alexander makes Algernon write Jack’s countryside address on an envelope rather than on his shirt cuff. He also cuts some parts in order to make verbal exchanges more slender. For example, in the following speech by Gwendolen in Act III he omits all but the fourth sentence (Their explanations appear to be quite satisfactory):

GWENDOLEN. I have the gravest doubts upon the subject. But I intend to crush them. This is not the moment for German scepticism. (Moving to Cecily). Their explanations appear to be quite satisfactory, especially Mr. Worthing’s. That seems to me to have the stamp of truth upon it. (lines 348, p. 84)

The scene that probably most shows Alexander’s precision is Jack’s entrance in mourning clothes in Act II. While in the draft and the licensing copy the entrance is much simpler, Alexander’s detailed stage directions make sure that the audience catches sight of Jack before he is seen by Miss Prism and Dr Chasuble, to reach the maximum of hilarity:

Enter Jack slowly from the back of the garden R [right]. He goes C. [centre]. He is dressed entirely in black. Dr Chasuble and Miss Prism both turn. Come down-stage, then toward C., see Jack for the first time.

In the standard version it is much simpler:

Enter Jack slowly from the back of the garden. He is dressed in the deepest mourning, with cape hat-band and black gloves (p. 50).

Wilde, too, continued polishing the text, adding adornments during rehearsals and, later, the correction of the proof sheets for the Smithers’ edition of 1899. As Jackson points out, some of the changes might seem trivial in themselves but had a serious consequence in a play so economical in its language and effects. Seemingly searching for the perfect witty joke, Wilde considered several variations of the title of Dr Chasuble’s sermon (Act II, line 249, p. 52), which was given for ben-

23. See Wilde, The Importance of Being Earnest, cit., p. 50, note 208.
charity described at one time or another as the «Society for the Prevention to Children» (a real organisation, and therefore not really suitable), the y for the Discontent among the Higher Orders» and, in the page proofs of edition, the «Society for the Discontent among the Lower Orders». He etered this to «Discontent among the Upper Orders». Another joke later im was Algernon’s remark on modern culture in Act I. In the draft the joke as neat as in the 1899 edition:

\[
\text{ufl} \]

\[
\text{tbn} \quad \text{One should read everything. That is the true basis of modern culture. More half of modern culture depends on the unreadable} \]

\[
\text{lnd} \quad \text{version} \]

\[
\text{tbn} \quad \text{Oh! It is absurd to have a hard-and-fast rule about what one should read what one shouldn’t. More than half of modern culture depends on what one ldn’t read (lines 130-2, p. 13).}
\]

setting of the acts underwent a change too. In the manuscript draft, Acts d iv were all in the garden of the Manor House. In the three-act and the Lord Chamberlain’s office Acts ii and iii were still in the garden. Oner versions was the action of Act iii moved indoors, to the morning-room king the garden. Wilde’s settings seem to be a clever variation of the old ince corruption/city and innocence/countryside, particularly evident at the ng of Act i, where Cecily is studying among the roses. As in Shakespeare’s s, the characters undergo an evolutionary process while they are in the side, but the final resolution of the problems — the characters’ symbolic their backs on their old life and facing their new, married life in a state of ess — and the happy ending are moved within the walls of the elegant House, more suitable to these upper class people. Setting the third act in so balances the alternation in-out-in of the three acts and provides the clos circle.

an Holland, Wilde’s son, tried to reconstruct the four-act version in 1957, result was not convincing from a theatrical point of view. As Bird points though we lose a short act there is clear gain in dramatic unity; and today ore than in Wilde’s time audiences do not care to sit through any play that r than three short acts. Bird also underlines a clumsiness in the balance ts in the first act and those of the next two, «which the four-act version ave further emphasised».

Wilde’s arrest on 5 April 1895 the play ran until 8 May, his name having been removed from the playbills and programmes. The play ran for a total of eighty-six performances but Alexander lost the sum of two hundred and eighty-nine pounds, eight shillings and four pence. While Wilde was serving his sentence, he was declared bankrupt and all his effects were auctioned, including drafts and manuscripts of published and unpublished works. Alexander was able to buy the copyright of The Importance of Being Earnest for a small sum. In 1902 he revived the play at the St James’s Theatre and, although it was well received by critics and public, it still did not make money. In 1909, on the second revival, it ran for eleven months and made a profit of over twenty-one thousand pounds, a very large sum of money at the time. On his death he bequeathed the copyright to Wilde’s son Vyvyan, who was considerably enriched by it.

The Importance of Being Earnest marked the apex of Wilde’s popularity, fame and career as a playwright. Its apparently flimsy structure has resisted the test of time, since it is still one of the most performed plays in English drama at present. The formula of its lasting success is the result of the collaboration between an extraordinary verbal genius and a theatrical star: Oscar Wilde and George Alexander.

\[\text{e Wilde, The Importance of Being Earnest, cit., p. 11, notes 130-3.}\]
\[\text{rd, The Plays of Oscar Wilde, cit., p. 171.}\]
\[\text{i, p. 172.}\]

\[\text{28 Ivi, p. 166.}\]