Purdy

The Importance of Being Earnest

Play Analysis & Scene Creation

One of the most interesting forms of narrative is the main character with a mistaken identity. Wilde’s characters in this play are always in a dualistic battle, externally with each other, yet internally with themselves.

This unit will be in three distinct sections:

1. Classroom reading of the play – We will have characters who will be reading the dialogue and making the play come alive. I will be stopping every now and then and explaining some key concepts and ideas that will help you with your own one act.
	1. After each act, I will have questions for us to discuss on my blog.
2. Your own scene: Most of you have probably never written a play before. I’m not asking for Tony Award winning material. All I would like is for a scene – about 5 - a cohesive and well written scene – or dialogue that has a believable conflict and resolution. You will present it for the class. This does not need to be memorized. There will be a rubric for this as well.

Below is an article on the idea of falsity and identity in the play. It is a brilliant academic piece you can look at. It is with this article that I designed this unit.

*“False impression[s]”: Writing in The Importance of Being Earnest*

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1

Oscar Wilde first achieved a degree of distinction at TCD (Trinity College, Dublin) and Oxford, then fame in America, as a dazzling conversationalist and orator, and his theatre is best known for the brilliance of his characters’ wit and the epigrammatic piquancy of his dialogues. A master of the spoken word, he reinvented the English and Anglo-Irish tradition of the comedy of manners by creating a theatre in which the pleasure of the bon mot supersedes the claim of psychological consistency and even logic, as Jack ruefully observes when he repeatedly remarks that Algy “never talk[s] anything but nonsense” (24). [1] All references to the play are to the Norton edition,...[1] As Declan Kiberd has pointed out, Wilde’s emphasis on the spoken word also links in with a specifically Irish literary tradition, and makes The Importance of Being Earnest a precursor of Synge’s The Playboy of the Western World (1907), in which a frail, unprepossessing young lad becomes a hero “by the power of a lie” (Kiberd 278). However, critical emphasis on the patterns of speech in Wilde’s Society comedies, and in particular in his last and wittiest play, The Importance of Being Earnest, has tended to obscure the fact that the play is also deeply concerned with the notion of writing which, this paper argues, is central to its aesthetics and politics. The play’s action is sustained by a proliferation of written texts of all kinds, from account books, registers and official certificates to newspapers, diaries, letters and Miss Prism’s infamous “three-volume novel,” all of which consistently fail to perform their commonly assigned function of documenting reality. Rather, the play suggests that writing comes first and creates—or, to use Wilde’s preferred equivocal term, “produces”—reality. Writing is thus implicitly endowed with a subversive, potentially emancipatory power “that reminds one of the worst excesses of the French Revolution” (19): unsurprisingly, Jack, who lacks known parentage and writes himself into existence, attracts the ire of Lady Bracknell, who stands in the place of the absent father and embodies the Law. I will suggest, however, that for all her averred conservatism, her discourse allows for a double entendre which both disqualifies and, on the sly, rehabilitates the power of writing and the practice of self-fictionalising, and accommodates the libertarian impulses of the young protagonists within the rigid structures of Victorian society.

2

The world in which the characters of The Importance of Being Earnest evolve may be ordered according to its own subtle, often unwritten rules, yet it is also deeply aware of legal procedures which regulate all aspects of public and private life. As Algy points out, marriage is a contract about which there is “nothing romantic,” one more than likely to end up in the “Divorce Court” (7). Jack’s obligations to Cecily, and the conditions of her coming of age, were stipulated in Sir Thomas Cardew’s will, and Jack suggests that the authenticity of this gentleman’s “three addresses” can be verified in the “Court guides,” while Cecily’s respectability is also established by the good name of her solicitors, “Markby, Markby and Markby” (50). The play’s concern with legal matters was even more evident in the suppressed “Gribsby episode” in the original four-act script of the play, in which solicitor Gribsby appears at the Manor House and produces a warrant of arrest against Algy, after the latter has failed to respond to “a writ of attachment” (a court order to seize assets) issued against him for running into excessive debts at the Savoy Hotel. This ubiquity of the law results in the production of legal papers which are called upon in the play for purposes of authentication, while other official documents, such as Cecily’s various certificates (legal, religious and medical) and the Army Books, are also brought in, ostentatiously, to ascertain the identity and respectability of those who seek the world’s approval. The written word is thus apparently granted an authority which is undermined, however, by the surge in writing which the play implicitly diagnoses as a symptom of modernity. Lady Bracknell’s dictum that “we live. . . in a age of surfaces” (51) is not just a doleful comment on the shallowness of her contemporaries, but also literally points to the proliferation of writing in this “age;” indeed the play is literally saturated with inscribed “surfaces,” such as Algy’s sheet music, Lane’s account book, Lady Bracknell’s notebook, Cecily and Gwendolen’s diaries, Dr Chasuble’s sermons, letters, telegrams, bills, etc [2] About the proliferations of texts in the play see Pascal...[2]. Even banal functional objects are turned into inscribable surfaces: Jack’s cigarette case bears the incriminating dedication which triggers the plot, Algy writes down Cecily’s address on his cuff-link, and Miss Prism’s entire life-story is legible in the creases of her long-lost handbag, which also bears her initials. Such proliferation both magnifies the written word and undercuts its authority. Significantly, the play opens with an act of emancipation from the authority of the printed page—Algy straying from the score as he plays the piano, and choosing to privilege “expression” over “accuracy” (a probable euphemism to account for untimely dissonance). Later in the scene, Jack is forced to own up to being “Jack” in the country, as testified by the inscription in the cigarette-case, yet Algy simultaneously confronts him with adverse evidence: “It is perfectly absurd your saying that your name isn’t Ernest. It’s on your cards. Here’s one of them. (Taking it from case.) ‘Mr. Ernest Worthing, B. 4, The Albany.’ I’ll keep this as a proof that your name is Ernest if ever you attempt to deny it to me, or to Gwendolen, or to anyone else.” (9) Algy affects to use the visiting card as evidence, indeed uses legal vocabulary (“proof”), but of course what the episode really shows is that neither the cigarette-case nor the card has the greater claim to authority, and that neither inscription can authenticate Jack’s identity. In the final moments of the play, doubt is finally lifted as the Army Book, a document whose authority is apparently unchallenged by all, reveals that Jack’s father’s name (hence Jack’s own name) was “Ernest John”; yet what the extraordinary coincidence really confirms is that Jack is as authentically, or inauthentically, “Jack” as he is “Ernest”: in other words, that the fundamentally inauthentic, fluctuating identity he has chosen for himself is authentically who he is. The Army Book, the authoritative written word which restores the Name of the Father, confirms the fiction by conforming to it. [3] One question which remains undecided is whether the...[3]

3

When Algy confronts Jack about the discrepancy between his two identities and urges him to “have the thing out at once,” Jack retorts that “you talk exactly as if you were a dentist. It is very vulgar to talk like a dentist when one isn’t a dentist. It produces a false impression.” (10) “False impressions,” of course, is just what Jack himself has been producing by having visiting cards printed in the name of “Mr. Ernest Worthing.” More generally, the play repeatedly suggests that in “an age of surfaces” all impressions may well out turn out to be “false impressions;” indeed even such serious, forbidding documents as the Court Guides are not beyond the suspicion of Lady Bracknell, who remarks that “I have known strange errors in that publication” (50). The written word has lost the power to authenticate reality, yet this entails no nostalgia, but rather a change of perspective: in modern times writing no longer replicates reality, but has acquired the power of producing it. By the end of the nineteenth century, writing is no longer the privilege of a restricted group of serious professionals (lawyers, priests, classical authors) but has become both democratized and feminized. The play testifies to the spread of newspapers in the second half of the nineteenth century: progress in printing and circulating techniques combined with the professionalization of journalism, and resulted in the increased production of existing newspapers and the appearance of numerous new titles, targeting all social groups and political sensibilities. In particular, William Thomas Stead’s new sensational style of investigative journalism, which became known as “New Journalism,” reached out to unprecedented numbers in the popular classes. The numerous mentions of newspapers in the play suggest that no aspect of public or private space escapes the eye of the press, a huge democratic forum which has dispossessed the elite of their right to set the tone and define communal values; Wilde, who was himself intensely involved in journalism, may not have found this development entirely deplorable. When Jack expresses his distaste for “modern literature,” Algy enjoins him to leave literary criticism “to the people who haven’t been at a University. They do it so well in the daily papers” (11). Gwendolen’s passion for the name “Ernest” is practically a response to a journalistic injunction: “We live, as I hope you know, Mr Worthing, in an age of ideals. The fact is constantly mentioned in the most expensive magazines, and has reached the provincial pulpits I am told. And my ideal has always been to love someone of the name of Ernest.” (15) Even Lady Bracknell recognises that her language is shaped by the phraseology of the press: “Was he born in what the Radical papers call the purple of commerce, of did he rise from the ranks of the aristocracy?” (18) Finally, Cecily and Gwendolen’s rivalry over the elusive Ernest first takes the form of a battle of press releases, then of diaries:

4

Cecily. (Rather shy and confidingly.) Dearest Gwendolen, there is no reason why I should make a secret of it to you. Our little county newspaper is sure to chronicle the fact next week. Mr. Ernest Worthing and I are engaged to be married.

Gwendolen. (Quite politely, rising.) My darling Cecily, I think there must be some slight error. Mr. Ernest Worthing is engaged to me. The announcement will appear in the Morning Post on Saturday at the latest.

Cecily. (Very politely, rising.) I am afraid you must be under some misconception. Ernest proposed to me exactly ten minutes ago. (Shows diary.)

Gwendolen. (Examines diary through her lorgnette carefully.) It is certainly very curious, for he asked me to be his wife yesterday afternoon at 5.30. If you would care to verify the incident, pray do so. (Produces diary of her own.) (40)

5

Despite Gwendolen’s resort to the vocabulary of authentication (“if you would care to verify the incident”), the contradictory announcements and diary entries do not perform a documentary function (neither of the two girls is really engaged to “Ernest”), but rather write the fictitious “Ernest” into existence. Just like journalistic writing, private writing does not so much document reality as shape it.

6

As a result, perhaps, of the “whole modern theory of education” which Lady Bracknell so deplores (Cecily reluctantly plods her way through a heap of “horrid” books, Gwendolen may or may not attend lectures by the University Extension scheme, and Dr Chasuble describes Miss Prism as “the most cultivated of ladies” (54), although she consistently fails to identify his classical allusions), most of the female characters in the play have in turn taken the pen in hand. Wilde’s age is that of the three-volume novel, which Cecily correctly associates with the spread of Charles Edward Mudie’s circulating libraries (25). Under this influence, novel-writing proved a lucrative activity for reasonably literate writers, both male and female, who were prepared to confine their novels within the pale of morality—as does Miss Prism, who boasts that in her lost novel “the good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what fiction means.” (26) This is hardly promising, and indeed Lady Bracknell confirms in disgust that the novel was “of more than usually repulsive sentimentality.” (55) Miss Prism is cast as a hopelessly incompetent writer, a fit match for Dr Chasuble who churns out edifying sermons but, as Cecily points out, “has never published a single book, so you can imagine how much he knows.” (37) The younger generation, on the other hand, are products of the “age of surfaces,” and more skilled writers. In Northanger Abbey, Jane Austen gently satirized the vogue for “journalizing” among the ladies of the gentry, and had the facetious Mr Tilney tease Catherine about this specifically female addiction. A century later, diary-writing has become a marketable literary genre in its own right, and in Wilde’s play it is quite free of the vaguely embarrassing aura which consigned it to secrecy, and has started to emulate the sensationalist techniques of New Journalism: Cecily openly admits that her diary “is simply a very young girl’s record of her own thoughts and impressions, and consequently meant for publication” (35), while Gwendolen boasts that she never travels without hers, since “one should always have something sensational to read in the train” (40). Both are also prolific letter-writers, Gwendolen ascertaining the quality of the postal service in Hertfordshire and promising Jack to “communicate with [him] daily” (23), while Cecily exhibits the innumerable letters she has written on behalf of “Ernest” over the period of their fictional engagement. Cecily’s diary, chronicling an engagement which never existed, completely subverts the genre’s conventions by dispensing altogether with a true basis. Likewise, the letters she writes to herself on behalf of “Ernest” are fabrications which supplement his absence and create a whole pathological being out of paper and ink: “The three you wrote me after I had broken off the engagement,” she tells the bemused Algy, “were so beautiful, and so badly spelled, that even now I cannot read them without crying a little” (36). The intentional spelling mistakes literally flesh out the distracted Ernest; when Algy finally appears at the Manor House, he has only to impersonate the emotional character which she has created in writing.

7

As a consequence of changing economic and cultural practices in modern times, such as the dramatic development of mass-produced newspapers and the extension of authorship, writing has lost its authenticating power, but in Wilde’s play it has gained, paradoxically, the ability to create reality. This links in, of course, with Wilde’s Aestheticism and his provocative proposal that “Life imitates art far more than Art imitates life” in “The Decay of Lying.” In this essay written as a philosophical dialogue, Vivian deplores the turn from Romanticism to Realism, in which art attempts to imitate life, as a form of decadence, and promotes the art of Lying, “the telling of beautiful untrue things,” as “the proper aim of Art.” What is envisaged as a paradoxical aesthetic ideal in “The Decay of Lying” is put to the test in The Importance of Being Earnest. Cecily and Algy’s actual idyll, for instance, appears as the mirror, the secondary and necessarily imperfect imitation, of the story of Cecily’s fictional engagement to “Ernest” in her diary. The play, however, explores the implication of this possibility not just in aesthetic terms, as in “The Decay of Lying,” but also in political terms.

8

Miss Prism, though she is herself an erstwhile and perhaps repentant writer, disapproves of diary-writing, and vainly attempts to warn Cecily off the habit:

9

Miss Prism.. . . You must put away your diary, Cecily. I really don’t see why you should keep a diary at all.

Cecily. I keep a diary in order to enter the wonderful secrets of my life. If I didn’t write them down I should probably forget all about them.

Miss Prism. Memory, my dear Cecily, is the diary that we all carry around with us.

Cecily. Yes, but it usually chronicles the things that have never happened. I believe that Memory is responsible for nearly all the three-volume novels that Mudie sends us. (25)

10

The exchange is oddly reminiscent of a passage at the end of Plato’s Phaedrus in which Socrates relates the myth of the origin of letters. The god Theuth has invented several arts, including the art of writing, and goes to the King of the Gods, Thamus, to present him with these inventions, claiming that with letters he has found a “remedy [pharmakon] for memory.” Thamus, however, rejects the art of writing: “the fact is that this invention will produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who have learned it because they will not need to exercise their memories, being able to rely on what is written, using the stimulus of external marks that are alien to themselves rather than, from within, their own unaided powers to call things to mind. So it’s not a remedy for memory, but for reminding, that you have discovered” (Derrida 102). Writing is rejected because it will induce men to seek information not in themselves, but in the “external marks” of the written text. Privileging memory over diary-writing, envisaged as a dubious supplement, Miss Prism echoes Socrates’ ethics of interiority, yet she fails to realise that Cecily’s earlier cue deconstructs the opposition between inside and outside by punning on the two meanings of the verb “enter”—to penetrate, and to write down as a diary entry. Claiming that “I keep a diary in order to enter the wonderful secrets of my life,” Cecily hints that the act of diary-writing itself implies introspection, or perhaps, in more Wildean fashion, that the introspective quest for self-knowledge which Miss Prism (after Socrates) so values need go no deeper inwards than the surface of the written page. In her answer to Miss Prism, Cecily then further denies memory any privileged relationship to truth, arguing instead that “it is responsible for nearly all the three-volume novels that Mudie sends us.” This is spoken in jest, but it implies that self-knowledge does not in fact emerge until it is committed to the written page: truth is always constructed in writing, whether it be in the deliberate self-fictionalising of diary-writing or in the more fanciful divagations of cheap fiction; Cecily’s point is indeed verified when Miss Prism confesses to having once written a three-volume novel.

11

Miss Prism’s motive for her hostility to diary-writing doesn’t sound entirely convincing, however, and we feel that what she really objects to is simply that Cecily should turn her attention away from German grammar to take out the more promising topic of Ernest’s chronic misdemeanours. More precisely, the activity of diary-writing, allowing her to create her own truth, frees her from the constrained existence which Jack has arranged for her under Miss Prism’s uninspiring tutelage. But this again connects with Socrates’ critique of writing in Phaedrus. As Socrates clarifies further in the dialogue, a written text differs from a logos (a spoken speech) because it is dissociated from its father (the speaker), who can neither explain nor defend it: “every word, when once it is written, is bandied about, alike among those who understand and those who have no interest in it, and it knows not to whom to speak or not to speak; when ill-treated or unjustly reviled it always needs its father to help it; for it has no power to protect or help itself.” In his commentary of the Phaedrus, Derrida teases out the implications of Socrates’ remark, who speaks from the point of view of Thomus, the King of the Gods and father-figure: if the logos is a son who needs to be assisted by his father, then the written text is like an orphan: “the specificity of writing would thus be intimately bound to the absence of the father” (Derrida 77). There is, therefore, something subversive about writing: from the point of view of the father, the written text is suspected of harbouring a parricidal desire; it is emancipatory, because it doesn’t recognise or refer to its origin. Cecily’s life is placed under the authority of a complex, layered patriarchal structure which continues to enforce the law of the father even after his death. This occurs through his particularly constraining “will” and Cecily’s “guardian” and “governess” and her diary-writing is an act of self-creation enabling her to break free from the fetters of patriarchy. Yet, paradoxically, it is Jack himself, the exemplarily “serious” guardian of the authority of the father, who best embodies the emancipatory potential of writing in the play.

12

Having been found in “the cloakroom at Victoria station,” Jack is an orphan who knows nothing of his real father: as Lady Bracknell succinctly puts it, his “origin [is] a Terminus” (50). To supplement for this absent father, a social persona was constructed for him out of a series of textual sources: Mr Thomas Cardew named him Worthing “because he happened to have a first-class ticket for Worthing in his pocket at the time” (19) and made him Cecily’s guardian in his will, literally creating the “serious” Jack of the country. Yet it is Jack himself, of course, who ultimately writes himself into existence by creating his alter ego “Ernest” to accommodate the less “earnest” side of his personality. As we have seen, both “Jack” and “Ernest” are fictions materialised by conflicting texts, the inscribed cigarette-case and the visiting-cards. The inaudible but visible pun which runs through the play and oxymoronically brings together the “wicked” Ernest and the “earnest” Jack testifies to the eminently textual nature of Jack/Ernest, whose literary tribulations started early in life when he was exchanged for a manuscript.

13

In the light of Jack’s deep affinity with writing, it is no surprise that Lady Bracknell should associate him with the quintessence of misrule: “To be born, or at any rate bred, in a hand-bag, whether it had handles or not, seems to me to display a contempt for the ordinary decencies of family life that reminds one of the worst excesses of the French Revolution. And I presume you know what that unfortunate movement led to?” (19) To suggest that the infant Jack may have been responsible for the disastrous chain of events that deprived him of his name and family is hilariously disingenuous, yet Lady Bracknell’s hostility to Jack is not quite as absurd as it seems. As a textual product, Jack indeed embodies the regicidal/parricidal, emancipatory, and potentially revolutionary spirit of self-creation which is what Lady Bracknell, in her role of Custodian of the Establishment, most abhors. Yet while it is customary to see Lady Bracknell as the embodiment of authoritarianism and normativity (Sammels), I wish to suggest that she is a deeply ambivalent character whose double language subverts the norms she ostentatiously strives to enforce.

14

Lady Bracknell stands in the place of the absent father and guardian of the Law in the play’s microcosm; the patriarch himself, Lord Bracknell, never appears on the stage but is described as a permanent invalid (indeed he may have been an inspiration for Algy’s Bunbury), a gull (Lady Bracknell lies to him about Gwendolen’s whereabouts in Act II) and a negligible quantity, as Lady Bracknell makes clear when Algy announces that he will miss her dinner: “I hope not, Algernon. It would put my table completely out. Your uncle would have to dine upstairs. Fortunately he is accustomed to that.” (13) Displacing Lord Bracknell, Lady Bracknell, imperially named Augusta, has usurped his function as embodiment of the Law, keeper of the family’s respectability and preserver of the privileges and exclusiveness of her class. In structural terms, she plays the comic role of the paterfamilias, the senex iratus who thwarts the love of the protagonists of the younger generation. Her favoured mode of speech is to utter decrees, authoritative statements and pronouncements which become true performatively, by the mere fact of her stating them. It is not just that she embodies the spirit of conservatism and normativity: rather, she edicts the norms, she is the Law. But while it is in the DNA of the traditional senex iratus to see his authority challenged and ultimately defeated by the younger generation, Lady Bracknell is herself, I argue, an undercover agent of subversion, and the double-dealing facilitator of the young people’s emancipatory desires.

15

Lady Bracknell’s political agenda is unambiguously conservative: her aim is to preserve the deeply inegalitarian status quo which ensures that the small caste to which she belongs continues to exert its privileges, as testified to by her grotesque phobia of the French Revolution. Yet instead of grounding her conservatism in the moral or political motivations usually invoked to justify it (the idea that the aristocratic elite is better equipped to rule the country because it is the natural depositary of its values, and that tradition should be perpetuated because it is the wisdom of the nation), she makes it entirely clear that her only preoccupation is money. Jack’s revelation of Cecily’s fortune suddenly allows her to perceive the young girl’s “really solid qualities” (50), and with the glib insouciance of the dandy, she both claims that she “disapprove[s] of mercenary marriages” and quite openly admits to having made one herself: “When I married Lord Bracknell I had no fortune of any kind. Yet I never dreamed for a moment of allowing that to stand in my way” (51). Here and elsewhere, Lady Bracknell exposes the hypocrisy of Victorian society in which rules proliferate and are sustained by no moral justification, but only the need to protect the wealth of the ruling class and allow them to acquire even more. While avarice is a defining feature of the traditional senex iratus, the cross-gender version of the role which Lady Bracknell performs again completely subverts the type by openly disclosing the greed and moral ineptitude of the so-called elite she represents, whilst satirically exposing the arbitrariness on which their privileges rest. Usurping the role of the father, she thus both gives an emblematic performance of patriarchal authority and reveals that this authority is grounded in a moral vacuum, thus allowing the young couples to challenge it.

16

This is perhaps most apparent in the famous scene in Act I in which Lady Bracknell interviews Jack to gauge his eligibility. All goes reasonably well for Jack until he reveals that he is an orphan of unknown origin; this, it seems, is a crippling fault which must bar him from ever entering the World, and marrying Gwendolen. On the surface, Lady Bracknell, in her role as paterfamilias and guardian of the Law, is protecting her caste from the intrusion of outsiders of doubtful extraction; her final line, delivered as she “sweeps out in majestic indignation,” leaves him with little hope: “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!” (20) The comic power of the line is due partly to its indignant grandiloquence, partly to the two absurd metonymies which cancel out Jack and replace him with the room and object in which he was “found.” It sounds like an irrevocable pronouncement which performatively erases Jack from Lady Bracknell’s list of eligible bachelors and turns him, literally, into a nonentity. Yet it also exposes the purely metonymic, materialistic logic which is at the heart of the marriage market, whereby individuals and their pedigrees are far less important than the material goods they bring into the “alliance.” Jack, of course, has given satisfaction in this respect, and while Lady Bracknell is forced to pay lip service to conventions and to reject him on the grounds of his obscure parentage, she is, at the same time, hinting that the real issue is wealth, and that his unknown lineage need not stand in his way if only appearances can be preserved—or, as she puts it succinctly in another triumph of double entendre: “The line is immaterial” (19). Hence her suggestion that he “produce at any rate one parent, of either sex, before the season is quite over” (20). Recognising Jack for what he is, an orphaned textual artefact, she encourages him to complete his task of self-writing by producing (creating) a parentage for himself, which of course he does in the final scene. Confirming that Jack’s name “naturally is Ernest,” the final coup de théâtre authenticates the fiction which Jack has “produced” for himself, in other words the textual artefact that his whole life has been. Reconciling “Jack” with “Ernest,” the Army List, the “earnest” book par excellence, simultaneously endorses Jack’s two personae and thus legitimates the very principle of self-writing. Having dutifully “produced a parent,” Jack will remain a fluid text, one which satisfies both Lady Bracknell’s demands for respectability and his own need for constant self-reinvention.

17

A play paradoxically saturated with written texts, The Importance of Being Earnest uses writing as a metaphor of self-creation, envisaged as a specifically modern process. Written documents abound, but their authority is undermined by their sheer proliferation, and the play suggests that “earnestness”—the faculty of being really, substantially what one is—is a thing of the past. Writing can no longer document reality, but it can “produce” it, as does Jack who writes himself, and his own parentage, into existence. A cross-gender impersonator of the Father and a devious guardian of the Law, Lady Bracknell encourages the practice of writing and promotes a world which pays lip service to conventions (as testified by the epidemic of marriages which concludes the play) whilst accommodating libertarian, potentially parricidal desires that smack of “revolutionary outrage.”