

Some Remarks on “Parody, Paradox and Play in *The Importance of Being Earnest*”*

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Niederhoff’s article is interesting and reaches a significant conclusion, but it does challenge critical debate. I shall follow its own divisions in my response to it.

(1) Parody

The essay begins by stating that the “most obvious example of parody in Wilde’s play is the anagnorisis that removes the obstacles standing in the way to wedded bliss for Jack and Gwendolen” (32). Perhaps, but to my mind the double identity of Jack and Algernon as a parody of Dorian Gray is even more obvious.

Niederhoff then moves on to discuss the scar which Odysseus received during his fight with a boar and which ultimately reveals his identity to his nurse Eurycleia, and ties it to the handbag that reveals Jack’s identity in *The Importance of Being Earnest*: “Instead of identifying Jack by means of the bag, Miss Prism identifies the bag by means of the ‘injury’ that it received from a Gower Street omnibus—an injury that would appear to be a parodic allusion to the famous scar which shows Eurycleia whose feet she is washing” (34). To connect the two events without further and more cogent proof than just the scar and the injury does not seem convincing to me, nor does the following

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For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the Connotations website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debniederhoff01312.htm>>.

statement in the next paragraph: "While the manuscript [...] stands for literature, the baby represents life in its most pristine and natural form" (34). Prism's manuscript does *not* stand for literature in general, nor is the baby—as far as I can see—presented as a symbol of anything.

Niederhoff then goes on to discuss *The Importance of Being Earnest* as a parody of literary conventions, and here he is quite good. One should caution, though, that Wilde's target in the play is Victorianism as a whole, and that the parody of literary conventions is part of this larger frame. There is also a good deal of self-parody in *Earnest*. Niederhoff rightly argues that Jack's exchange with Miss Prism, in which Jack mistakenly assumes that she is his mother, is a parody of the fallen woman as seriously presented in *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *A Woman of No Importance* (35-36). I would add that the entire double-identity situation of Jack and Algernon reduces to nonsense the sinister double life of Dorian Gray, that Dr. Chasuble—especially in his repressed sexuality—is a parody of Jokanaan, that Algernon's engagement makes fun of the theme of determinism prominent in some of Wilde's earlier works, that Gwendolen and Cecily constitute a split personality, that Jack's misadventures as a baby parody not only the Victorian convention of the abused child but also Wilde's serious use of this convention in some of his earlier works, and so on. The result is that *Earnest* is at one level a self-parody, in which Wilde reduces not only Victorianism but his own earlier works to the level of nonsense.

The author ends by making a useful distinction between satiric parody and ludic parody. In the former, the author satirizes society while presenting a saner set of values. In the latter, however, there is no standpoint, no set of values to replace those that are being satirized. Niederhoff argues convincingly that Wilde's play is an excellent example of ludic parody.

He also makes a very valuable point during his argument which can easily be developed into a separate essay. "In addition," he writes, "the play offers something like a parody of itself, with later scenes or speeches providing comic repetitions of earlier ones" (37). This is an

idea well worth exploring, especially since Wilde parodies his earlier works so heavily in *Earnest*.

(2) Paradox

This section is short, and perhaps rightly so, as paradox in *Earnest* has been discussed by many critics. The author points out that a paradox startles us by violating logic or common sense, but also challenges us to make sense of it.

(3) The Connection between Parody and Paradox

The Importance of Being Earnest is full of both parody and paradox, but what is the connection between them? While paradox maintains the exact opposite of received opinion, Niederhoff states, parody can exaggerate, debase or invert. When it inverts, parody overlaps with paradox, as for instance when Wilde takes an expression and replaces one of its words with its opposite.

His main point, though, comes later: "My final and most important argument for the connection between parody and paradox hinges on the concept of play. [...] Wilde offers us a theory of paradox in which the concept of play figures prominently" (44-45). Here Niederhoff is excellent. He connects Wilde with Lord Henry's rhetoric, presenting them both as jugglers of ideas, but complex jugglers whose play includes seriousness as a *possibility*. This is a correct and valuable description of Wilde's method, for he leaves us constantly guessing if he is serious, and if yes, to what extent. He is forever playing not only with ideas but with the very concept of earnestness.

(4) Why is *The Importance of Being Earnest* Wilde's Masterpiece?

According to Niederhoff, who echoes other critics here, the reason for *Earnest's* great success is the fusion of form and content. In his other

works, Wilde's wit clashed with a sober content, but not so in *Earnest*. This is undoubtedly true. In creating his never-never land of wit and nonsense, Wilde captured a mood, a state of mind, that no one before or after him has been able to capture so perfectly. As we enter this fabulous children's world for adults, form and content blend perfectly. One can even argue that Wilde's experimentation with literary forms was, at least in part, a lifelong search for the right form to house his matchless wit. In his last play, he finally found it.

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