

Parody, Paradox and Play in *The Importance of Being Earnest*¹

BURKHARD NIEDERHOFF

1. Introduction

The Importance of Being Earnest is an accomplished parody of the conventions of comedy. It also contains numerous examples of Oscar Wilde's most characteristic stylistic device: the paradox. The present essay deals with the connection between these two features of the play.² In my view, the massive presence of both parody and paradox in Wilde's masterpiece is not coincidental; they are linked by a number of significant similarities. I will analyse these similarities and show that, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, parody and paradox enter into a connection that is essential to the unique achievement of this play.

2. Parody

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. The first of these obstacles is a lack of respectable relatives on Jack's part. As a foundling who was discovered in a handbag at the cloakroom of Victoria railway station, he does not find favour with Gwendolen's mother, the formidable Lady Bracknell. She adamantly refuses to accept a son-in-law "whose origin [is] a Terminus" (3.129). The second obstacle is Gwendolen's infatuation with the name "Ernest," the alias under which Jack has courted her. When she discovers that her lover's real name is Jack, she regards this as an "insuperable barrier" between them (3.51). Both difficulties are removed when the true identity of the foundling is revealed. It turns out

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that Jack has been christened “Ernest” and that he is Lady Bracknell’s nephew. Thus he bears the name that Gwendolen insists on, and he has also acquired respectable relatives—even Lady Bracknell would find it hard to raise convincing objections against herself.

The anagnorisis comes about through a visible sign, a time-honoured method first discussed in Aristotle’s *Poetics*. The most famous example of this method, also mentioned by Aristotle,³ is the scar which Odysseus owes to his courageous fight with a boar and which reveals his identity to his nurse Eurycleia when he returns to Ithaca after an absence of twenty years. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the sign that proves Jack’s identity is the handbag in which he was found. His former nurse, Miss Prism, explains how the baby ended up in the bag:

Miss Prism. [...] On the morning of the day you mention, a day that is forever branded on my memory, I prepared as usual to take the baby out in its perambulator. I had also with me a somewhat old, but capacious handbag in which I had intended to place the manuscript of a work of fiction that I had written during my few unoccupied hours. In a moment of mental abstraction, for which I can never forgive myself, I deposited the manuscript in the bassinette and placed the baby in the hand-bag.

Jack. (*who had been listening attentively*) But where did you deposit the hand-bag?

Miss Prism. Do not ask me, Mr Worthing.

Jack. Miss Prism, this is a matter of no small importance to me. I insist on knowing where you deposited the hand-bag that contained that infant.

Miss Prism. I left it in the cloak-room of one of the larger railway stations in London.

Jack. What railway station?

Miss Prism. (*quite crushed*) Victoria. The Brighton line. (*Sinks into a chair*)

[...]

Enter Jack with a hand-bag of black leather in his hand

Jack. (*rushing over to Miss Prism*) Is this the hand-bag, Miss Prism? Examine it carefully before you speak. The happiness of more than one life depends on your answer.

Miss Prism. (*calmly*) It seems to be mine. Yes, here is the injury it received through the upsetting of a Gower Street omnibus in younger and happier days. Here is the stain on the lining caused by the explosion of a temperance beverage, an incident that occurred at Leamington. And here, on the lock, are my initials. I had forgotten that in an extravagant mood I had had

them placed there. 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. (3.344-90)

Even in comedy, anagnorises that bring about family reunions tend to be tearful events, or at least highly emotional ones,⁴ but the emphasis placed on Miss Prism's battered old bag undercuts any such sentiments. It introduces the comic incongruity between debased or trivial content and dignified form that figures prominently in most definitions of parody.⁵ To Miss Prism, the scene is not about the restoration of a lost child but about the recovery of a handbag. The sign whose function it is to identify the hero usurps the status of the hero. 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 (in both cases, two decades or more have passed when the hero re-encounters his nurse).

Parodies have a metaliterary tendency. By both imitating and distorting a text or a genre, they lay bare its conventions, pulling the audience out of the represented world and making it aware of the means and methods of representation. This is especially true of the anagnorisis of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Wilde makes no attempt to hide the fact that he is using a literary convention. On the contrary, by offering an extremely ingenious and improbable solution to Jack's problems he highlights the contrived and artificial character of the convention. A metaliterary note is also struck by the curious replacement of a baby with a manuscript, of a child with a brainchild. While the manuscript obviously stands for literature, the baby represents life in its most pristine and natural form. When Miss Prism puts the former in the place of the latter, literature prevails over life. Perhaps we may even detect an allegory of parody in Miss Prism's mistake. After all, there are two contents and two containers: a baby who belongs in a pram, and a manuscript which belongs in a bag. Exchanging the baby and the manuscript brings about the very incongruity of form

and content which is typical of parody. Be that as it may, the metaliterary quality of the anagnorisis is also suggested by the comments of the participants, who talk as if they knew that they are characters in a play. When Jack rushes off to search for the handbag, Lady Bracknell states that “strange coincidences are not supposed to occur” (3.369-70), and Gwendolen adds, “This suspense is terrible. I hope it will last” (3.378)—a paradoxical wish that combines the point of view of a character with that of a spectator.⁶

The way to the true anagnorisis is paved with a number of ludicrously false ones. After Miss Prism’s assumption that the scene is about handbags rather than about human beings, Jack makes a discovery that is no less ridiculous:

Jack. (in a pathetic voice) Miss Prism, more is restored to you than this handbag. 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 (3.391-404).

Just as in the exchange about the handbag, moods and attitudes are singularly mismatched. Jack feels all the emotions appropriate to an anagnorisis scene. He is so full of joy and gratitude that he is moved to forgive his mother for straying from the path of virtue. But Miss Prism, who has maintained a rigid respectability throughout the play, is highly offended by Jack’s assumption that she has given birth to an illegitimate child. To her, his generous words of forgiveness come as a gross insult. It should be added that the exchange between Jack and Miss Prism amounts to an exercise in self-parody on Wilde’s part. It makes fun of the fallen woman, a subject that he deals with in a seri-

ous manner in *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *A Woman of No Importance*. Jack's speech is a comic echo of the message of these earlier plays, including an almost verbatim repetition of Hester's complaint about the double standard in *A Woman of No Importance* (2.299-300).⁷

The scene in which Jack proposes to Gwendolyn provides us with another interesting example of Wildean parody:

Jack. Gwendolen, I must get christened at once—I mean we must get married at once. There is no time to be lost.

Gwendolen. Married, Mr Worthing?

Jack. (*astounded*) Well ... surely. You know that I love you, and you led me to believe, Miss Fairfax, that you were not absolutely indifferent to me.

Gwendolen. I adore you. But you haven't proposed to me yet. Nothing has been said at all about marriage. The subject has not even been touched on.

Jack. Well ... may I propose to you now?

Gwendolen. I think it would be an admirable opportunity. And to spare you any possible disappointment, Mr Worthing, I think it only fair to tell you quite frankly beforehand that I am fully determined to accept you.

Jack. Gwendolen!

Gwendolen. Yes, Mr Worthing, what have you got to say to me?

Jack. You know what I have got to say to you.

Gwendolen. Yes, but you don't say it.

Jack. Gwendolen, will you marry me? (*Goes on his knees*)

Gwendolen. Of course I will, darling. How long you have been about it! I am afraid you have had very little experience in how to propose.

Jack. My own one, I have never loved anyone in the world but you.

Gwendolen. Yes, but men often propose for practice. I know my brother Gerald does. All my girl-friends tell me so. What wonderfully blue eyes you have, Ernest! They are quite, quite, blue. I hope you will always look at me just like that, especially when there are other people present. (1.413-40)

Even more than in the anagnorisis scene, in which she and her mother make comments with metadramatic overtones, Gwendolen thinks of the occasion in terms of a script and of a part that has to be played and to be practiced. In this case, the parodic incongruity does not result from a clash between a high, dignified form and a low, ignoble content, but from the contrast between Gwendolen's formal and artificial script and Jack's more flexible and spontaneous one. He talks extempore, assuming that there is no need to utter what has already been implied. Gwendolen, however, does not tolerate any deviation from

her script; she makes her suitor play his part and say all his lines. Paradoxically, her very insistence on following the script brings about a major deviation from it. In a proposal conducted along traditional lines, it is the man who plays the active part, while the woman reacts to his demands. In the case of Jack and Gwendolyn, these roles are exchanged. Not only is Gwendolen in charge of the conversation, she even assumes that ultimate privilege of the male sex, the praise of the beloved's eyes.⁸

A final parodic feature of the proposal and other exchanges between Jack and Gwendolen becomes evident if one compares them with similar scenes from the second courtship plot. I have already mentioned the way in which *The Importance of Being Earnest* parodies Wilde's treatment of the fallen woman in his previous works. In addition, the play offers something like a parody of itself, with later scenes or speeches providing comic repetitions of earlier ones. Jack's proposal to Gwendolen is replayed by Algernon and Cecily, with minor variations on the same themes. Cecily also confesses her fascination with the name "Ernest" (2.505); she also admires her lover's beauty—not his eyes, but his curls (2.489, 2.530)—and she also thinks of the proposal in terms of a script. In her case, this script is not merely a metaphorical or mental one; the story of her courtship by Algernon has literally been written down in her diary. The parodic effect of this has been pointed out by Neil Sammells, who makes a number of perceptive comments on Wildean parody in an essay on Tom Stoppard's *Travesties*:

The structure of Wilde's play is that of a travesty: Jack's proposal to Gwendolen is played again, and travestied, by Algy and Cecily; Lady Bracknell's interrogation of Jack in Act One reappears in a different form in her haranguing of Miss Prism. Similarly, individual scenes are themselves structured by travesty with one voice restating and confounding the other. (383)

Sammells does not explain what he means by the latter kind of travesty based on "one voice restating and confounding the other" in a single scene, but the following exchange between Gwendolen and

Cecily might qualify as an example. It is the quarrel that follows their mistaken discovery that they are both engaged to the same man:

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 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*) I never travel without my diary. One should always have something sensational to read in the train. I am so sorry, dear Cecily, if it is any disappointment to you, but I am afraid I have the prior claim.

Cecily. It would distress me more than I can tell you, dear Gwendolen, if it caused you any mental or physical anguish, but I feel bound to point out that since Ernest proposed to you he clearly has changed his mind.

Gwendolen. (meditatively) If the poor fellow has been entrapped into any foolish promise I shall consider it my duty to rescue him at once, and with a firm hand.

Cecily. (thoughtfully and sadly) Whatever unfortunate entanglement my dear boy may have got into, I will never reproach him with it after we are married. (2.622-48)

Gwendolen and Cecily imitate each other to an extraordinary degree. They perform the same actions (showing a diary to their rival), strike the same attitudes (“*meditatively*” and “*thoughtfully*”), and say exactly the same things, a fact that is only highlighted by their elaborate efforts at finding synonyms: “some slight error”—“some misconception”; “I am so sorry”—“It would distress me”; “the poor fellow”—“my dear boy”; “entrapped”—“entanglement”; etc. The parodic effect is brought about in a rather unusual manner in this dialogue. It would be misleading to say that the speeches uttered by one woman are exaggerated, distorted or debased version of the speeches delivered by the other. Instead, the parodic effect results from the closeness of the imitation. Gwendolen and Cecily violate the assumption that

human beings should be individuals, not Bergsonian parrots who repeat somebody else's words and actions. If there is an element of parodic debasing, it consists in this reduction of a human being to a puppet. At any rate, the repetitions across or within the scenes from the two courtship plots are similar to the more obvious examples of parody, such as the anagnorisis, in that they strongly emphasize the artificiality of the characters' words and actions; instead of being spontaneous and unpredictable, these are governed by prior scripts and models.

Before we move on to paradox, a final word needs to be said about the mode of parody in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Parodies can be satiric; witness Henry Fielding's *Shamela*, which ridicules both the literary form and the social values of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*. Richard Foster interprets *The Importance of Being Earnest* along these lines. He argues that "[b]y exposing and burlesquing the vacuities of a moribund literature Wilde satirizes, too, the society that sustains and produces it" (23). According to this view, the girls' romantic scripts, which they have imbibed from novels and plays and which they impose on their lovers, are bound up with hollow social values, and the parody of the literary conventions becomes a satiric attack on these values. In my view, however, the play's parody is ludic rather than satiric.⁹ The parodic scenes discussed in this essay offer a lot of comic incongruity, but the laughter evoked by this incongruity is not directed at a particular target. It is not satiric laughter that attacks one set of values in the name of another. As Andreas Höfele argues, the play lacks a precondition of effective satire: a standpoint (191). In the proposal scenes, for instance, we laugh at the young women's infatuation with an artificial social ritual, but we also admire the energy and the inventiveness that they show in shaping this ritual. And we laugh at their lovers just as much as at the young women. It would be simplistic to argue that the proposal scenes ridicule formality and etiquette in order to endorse a more natural and spontaneous way of interacting with other human beings.

To clarify what I mean by ludic parody, it might be helpful to borrow a distinction from Wayne Booth's *Rhetoric of Irony*, a borrowing that seems to me justified because of the proximity of irony and parody. Both of these rhetorical strategies entail the assumption of a voice that is not one's own; in irony, this voice is usually an invented one that is created by the ironist him- or herself; in parody, it is borrowed from a prior text. Booth distinguishes between stable and unstable irony. Faced with stable irony, the audience notices that the speaker cannot possibly mean what he or she says, and it infers what is meant instead (usually the opposite of what has been said). Faced with unstable irony, the audience notices that the speaker cannot possibly mean what he or she says, but it is incapable of taking the second step, of concluding what is really meant; the speaker does not commit him- or herself to any particular meaning. If we apply this distinction to our topic, stable irony becomes the equivalent of satiric parody, while unstable irony becomes the equivalent of ludic parody. With satiric parody, the audience realizes that the parodist ridicules the parodied text and its values, and it infers what a more natural text and a saner set of values would look like. With ludic parody, the audience notices that there is some sort of comic incongruity (in other words, that there is parody), but finds itself incapable of taking the second step, of inferring a set of values and a text that could replace the parodied text and its values. The experience of watching or reading *The Importance of Being Earnest* is of the latter sort.

3. Paradox in Wilde

I have given a fairly extensive analysis of parody in *The Importance of Being Earnest* as this topic has not been discussed by many critics. The topic of paradox in this play and in Wilde's writings generally has received more attention;¹⁰ thus it need not detain us very long. However, before moving on to the connection between parody and paradox we should consider a distinction between two types of paradox that is relevant to Wilde's use of this device. The first type links opposite terms in a contradictory manner, as in "less is more." Paradoxes of

this sort are infrequent in Wilde. He prefers a second type, which consists in stating the opposite of a received opinion; in other words, this second type of paradox contradicts not itself but common sense.¹¹ An example is provided by Gwendolen. As the analysis of the proposal scene has shown, she has little respect for traditional gender roles. This also becomes evident in the following speech: "Outside the family circle, papa, I am glad to say, is entirely unknown. I think that is quite as it should be. The home seems to me to be the proper sphere for the man" (2.563-65). There is nothing self-contradictory about this speech; what it contradicts is the Victorian view that a wife should be the angel in the house, while her husband goes abroad to fight the battles of the world. A further example of the anti-commonsensual paradox comes from "The Decay of Lying," an essay that is in the tradition of the paradoxical encomium, a genre that praises what is normally dispraised.¹² Wilde's praise of lying attacks a number of received ideas, in particular the nineteenth-century doctrine of realism. Whereas the realists argue that it is the task of art to imitate life, Wilde claims that the exact opposite is valid: "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life" (239).

Furthermore, it should be kept in mind that a mere contradiction, of whatever kind, does not amount to a paradox. With both types of paradox, the element of contradiction has to be complemented by the possibility of sense. On the one hand, a paradox startles us with a violation of logic or common sense; on the other hand, it allows and challenges us to make sense of it, to endow absurdity with meaning. If this possibility of sense did not exist, we would not be dealing with a paradox but with mere error and inconsistency.

4. The Connection between Parody and Paradox

Para means 'beside,' *ode* means 'song,' and *doxa* means 'opinion.' Literally, a parody is something that positions itself 'beside a song' (or, more generally, beside a text), whereas a paradox positions itself 'beside an opinion.' This etymological consideration suggests a first link. The text or opinion that parody or paradox responds to must be

generally known. There is no point in positioning oneself beside something which no one is familiar with; if a parody or a paradox are to be recognized as such, the audience must be acquainted with the text or the opinion they are based on.

The preposition *para*, which is present in both terms, refers to the procedure that parody or paradox apply to a text or to an opinion. If we stick to the principal meaning of *para*, this procedure places parody 'beside' a familiar text, and paradox 'beside' a received opinion. In the case of paradox, 'beside' does not designate the concept with sufficient precision. The meaning has to be shifted to 'against' or 'contrary to.' For a paradox is not merely incongruous with a received opinion; it maintains the exact opposite. In the case of parody, the meaning of *para* cannot be narrowed down in a similar fashion. The preposition has a greater range of meaning as the techniques of parody are various: it can exaggerate the stylistic features of the parodied text, debase its content, or invert one of its elements, turning it into its opposite. In other words, a parody can place itself 'beside,' 'below,' or 'against' a text. Thus there is a partial overlap in the procedures of parody and paradox: inversion, or the change to the opposite, which amounts to the principal procedure of the latter, is at least one of the techniques of the former.

The main difference between the two terms is that between *ode* and *doxa*. A parody responds to a song or, more generally, a text, while a paradox responds to a received opinion. However, this difference is minimised if a received opinion is routinely expressed in a particular text, if text and opinion are so closely connected that a response to one entails a response to the other. A connection of this kind exists, for example, in proverbs and idioms, in which a commonsensical notion is coupled with a fixed expression. Interestingly, Wilde has a predilection for taking such an expression and replacing one of its words with its opposite.¹³ What results is both a parody and a paradox. An example is provided by the following speech from *The Importance of Being Earnest*, in which Algernon anticipates the tedium of a dinner at Lady Bracknell's:

She will place me next Mary Farquhar, who always flirts with her own husband across the dinner-table. That is not very pleasant. Indeed, it is not even decent ... and that sort of thing is enormously on the increase. The amount of women in London who flirt with their own husbands is perfectly scandalous. It looks so bad. It is simply washing one's clean linen in public. (1.239-44)

Algernon parodies the idiom *to wash one's dirty linen in public* by performing a minimal formal change; he replaces the adjective *dirty* with its antonym *clean*. The resulting inversion of the idiom's meaning also produces a paradox. While common sense maintains that one should not publicise one's affairs and adulteries, Algernon thinks the same about marital happiness and harmony. He considers it "perfectly scandalous" for a couple to flaunt the lack of scandal in their marriage.

A second example of the combination of parody and paradox from *The Importance of Being Earnest* is slightly more complex. The received opinion that is targeted here is the notion that a person's social rank is reflected not merely in birth and possessions but also in his or her manners. The 'text' that expresses this opinion is not a fixed string of words but, more loosely, a convention in the characterization of masters and servants in comedy. In this genre, the masters drink, preferably wine or champagne, whereas the servants eat, usually fairly rich food.¹⁴ Wilde brings about an exchange of these roles in the first scene of his play:

Algernon. [H]ave you got the cucumber sandwiches cut for Lady Bracknell?

Lane. Yes, sir. (*Hands them on a salver*)

Algernon. (*inspects them, takes two, and sits down on the sofa*) Oh! ... by the way, Lane, I see from your book that on Thursday night, when Lord Shoreham and Mr Worthing were dining with me, eight bottles of champagne are entered as having been consumed.

Lane. Yes, sir; eight bottles and a pint.

Algernon. Why is it that at a bachelor's establishment the servants invariably drink the champagne? I ask merely for information.

Lane. I attribute it to the superior quality of the wine, sir. I have often observed that in married households the champagne is rarely of a first-rate brand.

Algernon. Good heavens! Is marriage so demoralizing as that?

Lane. I believe it *is* a very pleasant state, sir. I have had very little experience of it myself up to the present. I have only been married once. That was in consequence of a misunderstanding between myself and a young person.

Algernon. (*languidly*) I don't know that I am much interested in your family life, Lane.

Lane. No, sir; it is not a very interesting subject. I never think of it myself.

Algernon. Very natural, I am sure. That will do, Lane, thank you.

Lane. Thank you, sir. *Lane goes out*

Algernon. Lane's views on marriage seem somewhat lax. Really, if the lower orders don't set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them? They seem, as a class, to have absolutely no sense of moral responsibility. (1.8-36)

Wilde parodies the convention by inverting it. The servant drinks champagne, while the master eats voraciously.¹⁵ By the time Lady Bracknell arrives, Algernon has devoured all of the cucumber sandwiches, and in a later scene he will make short work of the muffins served at Jack's country residence. The dialogue between Algernon and Lane nicely illustrates the closeness between parody and paradox in the play, as it culminates in a paradox which is also based on an inversion of the roles of master and servant. Whereas Victorian common sense regards it as a task of the middle and upper classes to set a good example to those lower down the social scale, Jack expects Lane to act as a role model for him: "Really, if the lower orders don't set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them?" One might retort that Lane is still useful to Algernon in serving the cucumber sandwiches, but such mundane considerations are foreign to Algernon, who shares his author's penchant for sweeping generalisation.

My final and most important argument for the connection between parody and paradox hinges on the concept of play. This concept has already been touched upon in the second section of this essay, where the mode of parody in *The Importance of Being Earnest* has been described as ludic. This ludic mode should not be confused with recreational drollery. It is not a temporary relaxation from (and thus subordinate to) seriousness. It is rather motivated by a fundamental uncertainty, by a scepticism that finds it difficult to take anything seriously. It is this mode of sceptical play which also characterizes Wilde's para-

doxes—at least if we follow the author's own suggestions. Wilde offers us a theory of paradox in which the concept of play figures prominently. This theory is to be found in the first chapters of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and it is mainly associated with Lord Henry, Dorian's aristocratic mentor (and tempter). The following passage describes Lord Henry enchanting a dinner-table audience with his paradoxical rhetoric:

"Nowadays most people die of a sort of creeping common sense, and discover when it is too late that the only things one never regrets are one's mistakes."

A laugh ran round the table.

He played with the idea, and grew wilful; tossed it into the air and transformed it; let it escape and recaptured it; made it iridescent with fancy, and winged it with paradox. The praise of folly, as he went on, soared into a philosophy, and Philosophy herself became young, and catching the mad music of Pleasure, wearing, one might fancy, her wine-stained robe and wreath of ivy, danced like a Bacchante over the hills of life, and mocked the slow Silenus for being sober. [...] It was an extraordinary improvisation. (78-79)

Lord Henry's rhetoric is essentially paradoxical. He starts out by disparaging common sense, the antagonist of paradox, and continues with the paradox that "the only thing one never regrets are one's mistakes." In his poetic description of Lord Henry's talk, the narrator mentions the term explicitly ("winged it with paradox"), and he also weaves the title of the most famous paradoxical encomium of world literature, Erasmus's *Praise of Folly*, into this description.¹⁶ The terms used to characterize Lord Henry's paradoxical rhetoric emphasize its ludic quality. It is play and improvisation; instead of weighing and pondering his ideas, Lord Henry throws them into the air and juggles them. This intellectual play is slightly mad and inebriated, but it is also far from mere drollery and facetiousness. For all its folly, it maintains the rank of a philosophy.

Lord Henry's interlocutors frequently claim that he does not mean what he says, or they ask him whether his paradoxes are to be taken seriously (55, 76, 77, 80). He carefully avoids giving a straight answer to this question. If he answers in the affirmative, the ludic quality of

the paradoxes will be eliminated. If he answers in the negative, the play will be at least diminished, framed and diminished by a context of seriousness. Lord Henry prefers a more radical kind of play, a play which includes seriousness at least as a *possibility*, which leaves its audience in the dark as to whether, and to what degree, it should be taken seriously. Here is how Lord Henry responds to Basil Hallward's charge that he lacks sincerity:

"I don't agree with a single word that you have said, and, what is more, Harry, I feel sure you don't either."

[...] "How English you are, Basil! That is the second time you have made that observation. If one puts forward an idea to a true Englishman—always a rash thing to do—he never dreams of considering whether the idea is right or wrong. The only thing he considers of any importance is whether one believes it oneself. Now, the value of an idea has nothing whatsoever to do with the sincerity of the man who expresses it. Indeed, the probabilities are that the more insincere the man is, the more purely intellectual will the idea be, as in that case it will not be coloured by either his wants, his desires, or his prejudices." (55)

Again, Lord Henry carefully avoids stating how serious he is about the claims he has made. Instead, he launches a surprising but not unpersuasive attack on the merits of seriousness and sincerity, thus giving a defence of the cognitive value of intellectual play.

In the following passage, we see two listeners responding to a paradox uttered by Lord Henry at his aunt's dinner table:

"I can stand brute force, but brute reason is quite unbearable. There is something unfair about its use. It is hitting below the intellect."

"I do not understand you," said Sir Thomas, growing rather red.

"I do, Lord Henry," murmured Mr Erskine, with a smile.

"Paradoxes are all very well in their way ..." rejoined the Baronet.

"Was that a paradox?" asked Mr Erskine. "I did not think so. Perhaps it was. Well, the way of paradoxes is the way of truth." (77)

The first response comes from Sir Thomas, the advocate of common sense. At first he finds Lord Henry's remark so absurd that he fails to understand it; then he grudgingly concedes that it might qualify as a paradox. But the manner in which he phrases this admission—

“paradoxes are all very well *in their way*”—indicates that he considers them an aberration from the path of reason and virtue. To him, paradox is a frivolous and inferior mode of speech that should not be admitted into postprandial conversation, let alone into serious intellectual debate. The second response comes from Mr Erskine, introduced by the narrator as a “gentleman of considerable charm and culture” (76). Mr Erskine does not find Lord Henry’s remark absurd. He does not even regard it as a paradox; so convincing does it appear to him. Then he admits, like Sir Thomas but from a very different point of view, that it might be considered a paradox, but he hastens to add that paradoxes lead towards truth. Mr Erskine picks up the image of the way introduced by Sir Thomas, an image that implies movement, and his own response is significantly dynamic, characterized by a to and fro. Lord Henry’s paradox has set Mr Erskine’s mind in motion. This is, on the listener’s part, the same intellectual motion that also characterizes the rhetorical play of paradox on the speaker’s part, a kind of play that embraces seriousness as one possibility among others.¹⁷

I would like to make a final stab at defining the ludic mode discussed here by looking at the pun on which the comedy ends. As it plays with a word that refers to the opposite of play, it has an obvious bearing on the present discussion:

Lady Bracknell. My nephew, you seem to be displaying signs of triviality.

Jack. On the contrary, Aunt Augusta, I’ve now realized for the first time in my life the vital Importance of Being Earnest.

The form of the final sentence conveys the exact opposite of its content. The ludic manner in which it states the vital importance of being earnest amounts to an assertion of the vital importance of not being earnest. Because of this combination of opposites, it amounts to a kind of paradox and provides another example of the link between paradox and play that I have discussed with respect to Lord Henry’s rhetoric. In playing with the word “Earnest,” the final pun repeats what the entire play has done with the name “Ernest” and the concept of seri-

ousness. Throughout the comedy, Ernest is only played: it is a fiction invented by Jack, a role used by him and Algernon, a fantasy embellished by Gwendolen and Cecily. When the final twist of the plot reveals that Jack's name is Ernest after all, it does so in the same spirit of parodic play that we have seen at work in the earlier stages of the anagnorisis, such as the recovery of a long-lost handbag. "Earnest" may be the final word of the comedy, but only according to the letter; according to the spirit, the final word is play.

5. Why Is *The Importance of Being Earnest* Wilde's Masterpiece?

The Importance of Being Earnest is generally considered Wilde's supreme achievement. Some critics have justified this view by arguing that in his earlier plays, and in *Dorian Gray*, the sophisticated rhetoric of such characters as Lord Henry, Mrs Erlynne or Lord Illingworth is at odds with other elements of the work, whereas in *The Importance of Being Earnest* this rhetoric is part of a coherent whole.¹⁸ Erika Meier describes the artistic discrepancy in the early plays as a clash between witty dialogue and melodramatic plot. Only in his final play does Wilde succeed in fusing action and dialogue:

The surprising events find their counterpart in the unexpectedness of the epigrams; the plot, with its final ironic twist, is complemented by the innumerable paradoxical sayings; and the parallel development of the action (the romance of Gwendolen and Jack on the one hand and of Cecily and Algernon on the other hand) corresponds to the formal and often symmetrical dialogue. In his last play Wilde indeed succeeded in fusing the drama of language (as created in his earlier works) and the drama of action. (195)¹⁹

I find myself in basic agreement with Meier's claims. In fact, the present essay provides an explanation of how "the plot [...] is complemented by the innumerable paradoxical sayings." It is because the treatment of the plot is parodic, and because of the links between parody and paradox pointed out above, that *The Importance of Being Earnest* is all of a piece. In the earlier plays and in *Dorian Gray*, the plot is treated in a serious or even melodramatic fashion; these works lack

the coherence between parody and paradox that characterizes Wilde's last play.

The incompatibility between playful paradoxes and a serious plot in the earlier works is illustrated by the ending of *Dorian Gray*. In this novel, the protagonist and his portrait change places in the first chapters. The man remains pure and beautiful like a work of art, whereas the picture turns more and more hideous with every evil act that Dorian commits. When he finally attempts to destroy the portrait, wishing to eliminate the visual record of his sins, he brings about his own death. Portrait and protagonist change places again; the former regains its original beauty, while the latter turns into an ugly and withered corpse. Thus the ending of the novel depicts a punishment of sin; it underlines the allegorical and cautionary character of the plot, whose orthodox morality and seriousness are a far cry from the exuberant and playful scepticism of Lord Henry's paradoxes.

The incompatibility between the plot and the paradoxes of *Dorian Gray* is not merely a matter of mode and atmosphere; there are even more specific contradictions between them. At one point, Lord Henry states:

The mutilation of the savage has its tragic survival in the self-denial that mars our lives. We are punished for our refusals. Every impulse that we strive to strangle broods in the mind, and poisons us. The body sins once, and has done with its sin, for action is a mode of purification. [...] The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it. (61-62)

Whereas common sense maintains that we keep morally pure by resisting temptation and avoiding sin, Lord Henry claims that the opposite is true. Self-denial poisons; sinning purifies. The plot, however, does not follow this paradoxical logic. Every temptation that Dorian yields to leaves its mark on the portrait; every sin that he commits adds another blemish. It is only in Lord Henry's speech that action is a mode of purification; in the plot of the novel, it remains a mode of defilement. The plot also clashes with the paradoxes of "The Decay of Lying" mentioned in the third section of this essay. Admittedly, there is a temporary period in which these paradoxes seem to

govern the plot. After the man and the portrait have changed places, life does imitate art in that Dorian is and remains as beautiful as the picture of his younger self. But in the portrait the traditional principles of mimesis and morality are upheld; art imitates life and teaches an ethical lesson in that every sin committed by Dorian is mirrored in the painting. It is the logic of the portrait that prevails in the end. Dorian's self-fashioning fails; the beautiful lie that his life is built on collapses, while the ugly truth is revealed. To sum up, the ending of *Dorian Gray* is at odds with the paradoxical rhetoric in this novel and in "The Decay of Lying," and this discrepancy remains unresolved.

The ending of *The Importance of Being Earnest* is comparable to the ending of *Dorian Gray* in that it also concerns the identity of the protagonist and his relationship with a kind of *doppelgänger* that enables him to lead a double life. In the novel, the *doppelgänger* is the miraculously changing image that inhabits the picture painted by Basil Hallward. This image allows Dorian to lead a life of sin because it bears the marks of this life, thus making it possible for him to appear spotless and innocent in the eyes of the world. The ending of the novel shows the tragic folly of this double life; the *doppelgänger* is annihilated when the picture returns to its former status as an ordinary portrait that is no longer subject to miraculous change. The *doppelgänger* of the play is "Ernest," the role that Jack has invented for the time he spends in London; this *doppelgänger* is surprisingly confirmed by the ending. It is revealed that Jack has indeed been christened "Ernest"; he has invented the truth, as it were. Of course, this confirmation is given in the same spirit of parodic play that characterizes the entire anagnorisis up to the final pun; the *doppelgänger* is confirmed precisely because he, too, is a manifestation of playing. Thus the ending does not amount to a lapse into seriousness; it is informed by the ludic mode that also inspires the paradoxical rhetoric of the play. The ending is also in tune with the very paradoxes of "The Decay of Lying"²⁰ that are negated by the ending of *Dorian Gray*. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, life imitates art in that "Ernest," the

creative lie, turns out to be true. The role is the ultimate reality; the truest poetry is the most feigning.

Ruhr-Universität Bochum

NOTES

¹The first version of this essay was delivered at the *Connotations* Symposium on "Sympathetic Parody," which took place in Mettlach and Saarbrücken in late July 2003. I am grateful to Matthias Bauer for organising this event, which was a felicitous combination of *prodesse* and *delectare*, and to the participants for their responses to my talk. I should also like to express my gratitude to Maik Goth, Frank Kearful, Sven Wagner and the anonymous *Connotations* reviewers for their comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

²To the best of my knowledge, this connection has not been systematically explored. In "Raymond Chandler: Burlesque, Parody, Paradox," Winifred Crombie analyses the links between clauses in Chandler's prose; she touches upon paradox only in the rather remote sense of inter-clausal connections of an illogical kind. She also claims that Chandler parodies the genre of detective fiction, but fails to establish a connection between parody and paradox.

³See *Poetics* 1454b.

⁴A particularly lachrymose example is the anagnorisis in Richard Steele's *The Conscious Lovers* (5.3), in which the merchant Sealand is reunited with his long-lost daughter Indiana.

⁵See, for instance, Abrams 26, and Genette 19.

⁶There is an additional metadramatic comment in the original four-act version, which Wilde cut at the behest of the director, George Alexander. After Jack has left the scene to search for the handbag, Lady Bracknell says, rather like an Aristotelian drama critic, "I sincerely hope nothing improbable is going to happen. The improbable is always in bad, or at any rate, questionable taste." See *The Original Four-Act Version of The Importance of Being Earnest* 105.

⁷This parodic self-echo is also pointed out by Meier 190 and Gregor 512-13.

⁸Female dominance is not limited to the proposal scene or the relationship between Gwendolen and Jack; it characterizes all of the heterosexual relationships in the play, and some others elsewhere in Wilde's oeuvre. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, for instance, Lord Henry gossips about a forward American heiress who "has made up her mind to propose" to Lord Dartmoor (76). On female dominance

in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, see Kohl, *Das literarische Werk* 176-77, Parker 176-77, and Raby 63.

⁹I borrow the term *ludic* from Gerard Genette's typology of parody and its related modes. One of Genette's distinctions concerns the attitude that a text may take towards the text(s) that it transforms or imitates. There are three basic modes: first, a satirical or polemical mode in which the source text is ridiculed; second, a ludic mode which creates comic tension between the two texts but no ridicule or derision at the expense of the source; third, a serious mode that translates a text into another genre or cultural context without any comic distortion (33-37). An example of the first mode is Henry Fielding's *Shamela*, of the second (as I would like to claim), *The Importance of Being Earnest*, of the third, Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus*. In his important article on parody and comedy, Ian Donaldson makes a distinction which is similar to the distinction between the first two of Genette's modes: "[M]uch of our delight in watching a comedy comes from our recognition of the presence of time-honoured situations, complications, and resolutions, which are introduced in a spirit not so much of ridicule or burlesque as of playful affection. The kind of comic parody which I want to explore [...] is not the open and sustained parody of the better-known burlesque and rehearsal plays, but a parody altogether more genial and gentle, devoid of major satirical intent, playing wryly but nonetheless delightedly with the conventions of the comic form" (45). I am grateful to Ian Donaldson for sending me a copy of his instructive article, which I had difficulties in obtaining.

¹⁰See, for instance, Catsiapis, Hess-Lüttich, Nassar and Zeender.

¹¹On the differences between these two types of paradox and on their ultimate similarity, see Niederhoff 49-52.

¹²On this genre, see Henry Knight Miller and Niederhoff 50-52, where further studies of the genre are listed.

¹³For further examples of this technique, see Donaldson 45 and Ogala 228-29.

¹⁴Some examples of servants who like to eat: Sosia in the various versions of *Amphitryon*; Dromio of Ephesus, who advises the man whom he believes to be his master, "Methinks your maw, like mine, should be your clock, / And strike you home without a messenger" (*The Comedy of Errors* 1.2.66-67); Jeremy, who, in the opening scene of William Congreve's *Love for Love*, prefers real food to the nourishment of the mind. The link between masters and wine is shown by Congreve's Mellefont who is praised as "the very Essence of Wit, and Spirit of Wine" (*The Double-Dealer* 1.1.34-35), or by Sheridan's Charles and Careless who see it as "the great Degeneracy of the Age" that some of their fellows do not drink, that "they give into all the Substantial Luxuries of the Table—and abstain from nothing but wine and wit" (*The School for Scandal* 3.3.1-5). Another case in point is the debate about the respective merits of wine and women, a debate frequently conducted by young gentlemen in comedy (e.g. by Merryman and Cunningham in Charles Sedley's *Bellamira*); the debate is never about food and women.

¹⁵This inversion of roles is missed by James M. Ware in his article on Algernon's appetite; Ware relates this appetite to the hedonism of the rakes in Restoration comedy.

¹⁶This allusion may be more than a passing reference; it may indicate an influence of Erasmus on Wilde or at least a profound affinity between them. *The Praise of Folly* evinces some very close similarities to Wilde's writings and to *The Importance of Being Earnest* in particular. First, it draws on the literary traditions of both parody and the paradoxical encomium, as C. A. Patrides points out in an article on Erasmus and Thomas More (39). Second, the preface asserts that "[n]othing is more puerile, certainly, than to treat serious matters triflingly; but nothing is more graceful than to handle light subjects in such a way that you seem to have been anything but trifling" (3). This seems fairly close to the subtitle of Wilde's play, *A Trivial Comedy for Serious People*. Third, *The Praise of Folly* is also informed by a spirit of sceptical play, by the eschewal of a fixed position. As Patrides writes, "Erasmus's mercurial protagonist is wont to disavow a number of specifically Erasmian tenets, admit as many others, and—more often than not—disavow and admit them at once" (40).

¹⁷The present explanation of the ludic quality of Wilde's paradoxes consists in a commentary on some passages from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Elsewhere I have given a more technical analysis of the ludic paradox, which distinguishes it from the comico-satirical paradox on the one hand, and the serious paradox on the other. This distinction is based on the relative weight of the opposites linked in a paradox, on the relative weight of the two principles which are at work in a paradox (contradiction and sense), and on the attitude taken by the speaker; see Niederhoff 60-76.

¹⁸Ian Gregor claims that Wilde found a fitting dramatic environment for the dandy only in his final play but not in the earlier ones, a claim that is echoed in Raby 34. Norbert Kohl takes a similar view of the earlier plays: "Der grelle Kontrast zwischen Pathos und Paradoxon, zwischen der unvermittelten sprachlichen Melodramatik rührseliger Heroinnen und dem artifiziellen Idiom der Dandys resultiert in Disharmonien, die der ästhetischen Homogenität der Stücke nicht eben zuträglich sind" (*Leben und Werk* 189).

¹⁹See also Dariusz Pestka, who argues that in the early plays "the plot is not comic at all, and only verbal wit and a few amusing characters counterbalance the serious problems; whereas in the latter [*The Importance of Being Earnest*] the plot contributes to the playful mood and reinforces other comic devices" (191).

²⁰A link between this essay and the play is also established by E. B. Partridge in his article, "The Importance of Not Being Earnest."

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