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OSCAR WILDE'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE COMEDY OF MANNERS

BY

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The present study attempts to trace the growth and the development of the comedy of manners through its various phases, up to about 1900. It will especially endeavor to bring together findings concerning the contributions of Oscar Wilde to this type of drama; an incidental problem is to find a link that connects the Victorian period, barren in dramatic expression, to the drama of the gay nineties, a period of revived comedy.

The desirability of this investigation is assured by the fact that the comedy of manners is a type of drama that exhibits characters temporarily involved in humorous or semihumorous complications and misadventure, who eventually solve their difficulties by the application of genial good sense. The true mood of comedy, according to The Anatomy of Literature, is one of amused tolerance for human fallibilities and amiable enjoyment of life's diverting complexities. It casts light upon human character, illuminates life with its flashes of universal truth. It had definite cultural effects on the life of the people of England at the time covered by

In this present study.

In keeping with its prevailing spirit comedy substitutes for strong emotional excitement a pleasurable sense of amusement and well-being or graceful sentiment. Its proper concerns are humor, wit, and satire. "Pure comedy", for instance, of the type of *Twelfth Night*, is so called because of its perfect incorporation of the pure spirit of comedy and its lack of any discordant, serious or satirical element. Similarly "romantic comedy", such as is found in *As You Like It*, exemplifies the pure comic spirit but adds the glamour of romance to set a pleasant emotional keynote for the play. Of that comedy which introduces satire, the most familiar type, according to Walley and Wilson, is the comedy of manners.² This type of literature will be discussed in the second chapter.

CHAPTER II

THE DEFINITION AND HISTORY OF THE COMEDY OF MANNERS

The Comedy of Manners receives its name from the fact that it is primarily concerned with the exhibition and satirical criticism of those manners and affectations of social intercourse. Since a social code usually requires a self-conscious artificial organization of society, the comedy of manners usually deals with the higher social orders and cultivates sophistication, smartness, and wit. According to Walley and Wilson, a specialized variety of character comedy made popular by Ben Jonson is known as "Comedy of Humors." This form throws into relief certain humors or dominant traits of human nature, for this is the purpose of such a play as Jonson's Every Man In His Humor. ¹

The word "humor" in his age stood for some characteristic whim or human quality. Jonson gives to his leading character some prominent humor and exaggerates it, just as a cartoonist enlarges the most striking features of a face. It is so portrayed that all other qualities are lost sight of. This is the method used by

¹. Ibid., 118.
Dickens in many of his novels.²

The line of demarcation between the comedy of manners and the comedy of humors, obviously, is none too clear. It consists partly in a difference in stage craft rather than in a difference in outlook; in a greater vivacity of rendering, rather than a variation in depth.

The comedy of manners during the Restoration period was much lighter in the handling of personalities, altogether more skillful than the comedy of humours. The moral did not have to be driven home with bluntness and blows and the disposition of a man could be appreciated without depicting the excesses of a Volpone or the madness of a Sir Giles Overreach.

Whereas the comedy of humour searched out and displayed the hidden recesses of human passions and desires, the comedy of manners showed that these emotions and desires were by no means rare, but might be encountered daily on the very streets of London. The comedy of manners attacked the unsocial types from another angle. The audience, instead of being asked to recognize some shortcoming of themselves in the characters they saw upon the stage, were invited to laugh at their acquaintances. Finally the comedy of humours was only

more profound in that it appealed to some supposedly absolute standard of morality, while the comedy of manners took for its standard that of the honnête homme of the time.

The comedy of manners, during the Restoration time was less earnest than was the Elizabethan comedy of Jonson's time. It tried just as earnestly to reveal mankind and consider the effect of passions and sentiment, but it dealt with everything more intellectually, more courteously and even more cynically. The Restoration comedy of manners showed more gaiety, and did not take its wisdom so seriously; it was entirely without metaphysical element. But if there was not so much furore poeticus, there was just as much deliberate criticism. Characters were ordinarily put upon the stage to be ridiculed. Since wit can not exist in space, it is of its very nature critical, or even satirical; it must be referred to something, and this something was what the comic writers of the time were wont to call "acquired follies". Sir Fopling Flutter is the main figure of The Man of Mode because in the words of Dorimant, he is a person of great "acquired follies". In the same manner, Congreve, In The Way of The World, strove to portray characters which should appear ridiculous not so much through a natural folly as through an affected wit.
How "acquired follies" were to be recognized apart from the inborn is a question which the writers of the period seemed to ignore. There is no immediate visible difference between an affectation and a vice, and Congreve's Scandal was correct when he said there was no effectual difference between continued affectation and reality. For, although in the "Letter" concerning "Humor", Congreve pointed out that humour is ineradicable and folly artificial, he gave no test by which the one could be readily distinguished from the other. Shadwell, who definitely hoped to continue the Jonsonian tradition, despised the farce-fools, whose humor was no more than extravagant dress, and the fool who aimed at the artificial folly of those who are not humorous by nature but artfully make themselves so. Vanbrugh has a passage to the same effect in The Relapse, where Loveless tells Amanda that pity should be shown to those whom nature abuses, but not to those who abuse nature.3

Restoration comedy of manners often dealt with what Jonson himself called humours. The only difference is that after 1660 there was on the whole a greater variety, brisker mingling of mirth; we might say, a lighter hand. Yet Jonson himself could use a light hand as this

passage from *Every Man in His Humour*, testifies:

Matthew: Oh, it's your only fine humour, sir. Your true melancholy breeds your perfect fine wit, sir. I am melancholy myself, divers times, sir; and then do I no more but take pen and paper presently, and overflow you half a score or a dozen. . . . Stephen: Truly, sir, and I love such things out of measure.

As an isolated passage, one might easily take it for Restoration comedy. In fact, Restoration writers saw no vast difference between their comedies and those of Jonson. Only gradually did a different method develop; for if the actual point of divergence cannot be indicated, there is at the extremes an evident difference between Jonson's comedies and those of the Restoration period. The method of the humour-comedy was akin to that of the moralities in that it clothed some abstract quality in the garb of a man, invested it with realistic trappings to make it appear human, then set it against a background taken from real life. It was not only critical of its own time, but of humanity in general.

The later comedy of manners applied an inverse method. It was immediately critical, it aimed at universality but it did so through the individual. While the comedy of humours never attempted to paint the whole

4. Ibid., 34.

man, the comedy of manners did. The emotions, the super­
perficial frills, affectations and shortcomings of the
Restoration man was a keynote to the comedy of the time.6

In reality Congreve and Shadwell based their
theory upon the introduction to Every Man Out of His Hu­
mour.

Asper: . . . Whatsoe'er hath fluxture and hu­
midity,
As wanting power to contain itself,
Is humour. So in every human body,
The choler, melancholy, phlegm and blood,
By reason that they flow continually
In some one part, are not continent,
Receive the name of humours. Now thus far
It may, by metaphor, apply itself
Upon the general disposition:
As when some one peculiar quality
Doth so possess a man that it doth draw
All his affects, his spirits, and his powers,
In their confluctions, all to run one way,
This may be truly said to be a humour.
But that a rook, by wearing a pyed feather,
The cable hat-band, or the three-piled ruff,
On his French garters, should affect a humour!
O, it is more than most ridiculous.7

Let us remember here that Jonson also intended
to strip the ragged follies of the time. Restoration
comedy very often dealt with what Jonson would have called
humours. Congreve's Captain Bluff is only Bobadil's
grandson; Witwoud is lineally sprung from Sir John Daw,
while Sir Amorous Lafolle has a hundred descendants.

7. Ben Jonson, Every Man Out of His Humour, 16.
Dobree explains that Restoration writers themselves saw no vast difference between the Jonsonian form and their own, and in the great majority of cases never got the difference in atmosphere clear. In the same way Massinger probably did not realize that *A City Madam* was in this matter something quite different from *A New Way to Pay Old Debts*. Only gradually do we see, not merely in each individual writer, but progressively throughout the period, steps being made toward a different method. Continually the humours blunder in upon the manners and spoil them; the heavy touch shatters the delicate effects. For, if the actual point of divergence is slight, it will be difficult to distinguish between the differences.

The comedy of manners then was no exception to any other critical comedy and no class was spared by the Restoration wits, who, not content with the "acquired follies" of their friends, flung their satirical wit not only over the eastern portion of London, but over the country seats as well, wherever men and maidens enjoyed the mirth of youthful follies. Thus it was the immediate, as opposed to the enduring, critical intent that developed the comedy of manners out of the comedy of humours. Both, in the hands of artists, became works of art, whose didactic sermon we may ignore if we wish.

There is another point which distinguishes the
comedy of manners from that of humour; namely, the spectacu-
tacular display of words. Restoration comedy is "dated" by its wit which was not always of the highest kind.
Much of it is on the level of Swift's Polite Conversation: "A penny for your thought." "It is not worth a farthing, for I was thinking of you." It is no worse than the Restoration play on words. The perpetual search for similes, the stiffness of manners, the search for antitheses mark and mar the comedy of manners.

This epigrammatic discourse was not just a device used on the stage, but it was a reflection of the fashionable life of the time. Often witty gallants at a dinner table created more real mirth than did some of the dull, affected figures acting on the Restoration stages. A sentence or two from the Diary of Samuel Pepys, who gives a true picture of the social life of the time, will help us to realize why comedy abounded in witty epigrammic speech:

Dec. 28-1667. To the King's house and there saw The Mad Couple, which is but an ordinary play; but only Nell's and Hart's mad parts are most excellent done, but especially hers: which makes it a miracle to me to think how ill she do any serious part, as, the other day, just like a fool or changeling; and in a mad part do beyond imitation almost.


The weakness of Restoration comedy lies in the fact that it was written for select groups. This is true. But the problem is to discover how great were the minds of the "particular and narrow set", and to understand their attitude toward life and to discover what forces were brought by writers to make their productions works of art.

Nicoll and Allardyce explain that Restoration comedy was not wholly of the manners style which was of superior type and too high to be attained by all playwrights of the period. Some chose the humbler paths of pure Jonsonian imitation. Out of Jonson and Fletcher, influenced by reminiscences of Molière, grew the comedy of the Restoration. It must of course, be realized at the very start that Restoration comedy is something far wider than is connoted by the modern use of that term by the major dramatists group which is composed of Etherage, Wycherly, Congreve, Farquhar, and Vanburgh,— to the almost complete exclusion of all those innumerable writers who supplied the Theatre Royal and the Duke's with their daily fare. It is perfectly true that this group of major dramatists undoubtedly represents English comedy at its highest. Before 1865 only two major dramatists, Etherege and Wycherly wrote plays that were acted for the public. Congreve did not produce his Old Bachelor until
January 1693, and the *Way of the World* did not make its appearance until 1700. Farquhar's eight plays date from 1699 to 1707. Vanbrugh's eleven plays date from 1699 to 1715. The school of manners, therefore, is by no means restricted, as the school of rimed heroics had been, to a single decade or two. It was not only peculiar to the court of Charles; it flourished long after Jeremy Collier's outburst of 1689, even after the fuller development of sentimental comedy in the hands of Cibber and Steele. Thus, the comedy of manners, brought to its fulfillment only in the last years of the century, was in itself a relic of license, and the wit, and the ease instituted by Charles II and his court.

This comedy of manners is a peculiar, intangible sort of thing. In plot and in character it is hardly an innovation. Fletcher's *The Wild Goose Chase* contains a good deal of its atmosphere. Jonson's personages abound in Etherege and Congreve. The intrigue of the Spanish school is to be marked in almost every plot. Molière and his companions of the French stage gave merely a touch to the wit and to the theme.

The title itself,—"Comedy of Manners," is rather difficult to explain, but there are indications which point to the characteristics of the type. Schelling calls Jonson's comedy a comedy of manners; so perhaps it
is, but certainly there is something in Congreve different from Jonson. Manners in the discourse of the Restoration dramatists meant something quite apart from the modern meaning of the term. When we speak of Congreve's comedy of manners, we are using the word in its Congreavian sense, betokening something brilliant about a man or woman, not a humor, but a grace or a habit of refined culture, something that looks a little *je ne sais quoi*. Genteel comedy, to use Addison's phrase, is this seventeenth century drama, not the ungenteel comedy of Jonson.

Even with these indications as to the inner nature of comedy, it is difficult to venture even as indistinct definition of the type. The manner school, after all, depends rather on an atmosphere which cannot be precisely analyzed, than on outstanding characteristics. In general, we may say, the invariable element of the comedy of manners is the presence of at least one pair of witty lovers, the woman just as emancipated as the man, their dialogue free and graceful, an air of refined cynicism pervades the whole production, the plot of less consequence than the wit, an absence of crude realism, a total lack of any emotion whatsoever. This will not take us very far, but it may serve at least to indicate in some ways the difference between the comedy of manners and the other types of Jonsonian sentimental
dramas. It is assuredly true that Dryden presents to us a pair of lovers somewhat after the style of the manners of heroes and heroines, and the Spanish intrigue could take part in the plays of Etherege and Congreve, but Dryden after all, may be regarded as one of the fathers of the typical Restoration Comedy; he is yet divided from Etherege by the presence in his works of a certain passion and enthusiasm.

Before passing to an examination of the diverse dramas of the various writers of groups, a few words may be said concerning that externally vexing problem of immorality in Restoration comedies. It is often hastily assumed and stated that the school of manners had a monopoly on immorality, and that Jeremy Collier put an end both to vice on the stage and to the comedy of manners in 1698. The second part of this assumption, to be discussed fully, will have to be noted later in the eighteenth century, but it may be stated here, fairly dogmatically, that neither the first nor the second supposition has any foundation in fact.  

McGraw explains that since the moral tone of many of the plays of the Restoration period had been distinct-

ly low, very frequently plays were closed officially or suppressed. Even Dryden with his Puritan background and classical style is reported to have written occasional objectionable plays. As might be expected, reaction was strong, and fear was felt that a second closing edict might result. A certain group of dramatists in the beginning of the age of Classicism, determined to purify the drama from within and began to write overly sentimental and moralizing plays. This movement gave rise during the eighteenth century to what is known as "sentimental comedy". Three playwrights are distinctly representative of the movement: Colley Cibber for the Careless Husband, Sir Richard Steele for The Funeral, and Mrs. Susanna Centlivre for The Busy Body.

Moving on from a mere purification of the drama, plays now came to take a definite moralizing attitude. Comedy tried to bring home to reader and audience the fundamental laws of life. Mimicry, play on words, mechanical devices, and other not strictly dramatic techniques came into being in the eighteenth century. Perhaps one of the redeeming tendencies of the period was the recurring tendency to borrow from the classics. This, however, tended to halt the progress of English comedy.

While Samuel Johnson was not a dramatist, he did write one play which merited public performance. His
real contribution to drama came from his influence on the large group of literary men surrounding him, many of whom were dramatists and actors of the day. The stimulus of the meetings which he dominated and the criticism and encouragement he gave to his followers account in no small part for the excellence of some of the comedies of the latter part of the century.

Two names most noteworthy in dramatic production, during the age of Classicism, are those of Oliver Goldsmith and Richard Brinsley Sheridan. Goldsmith was "discovered" by Johnson and became one of his finest pupils. One of his plays, The Good Natured Man, showed the author's marked ability; but his real claim to fame lies in the recurring favorite, She Stoops to Conquer. Sheridan was a strong rival of Goldsmith in dramatic circles. His two plays, The Rivals and The School for Scandal, demonstrated his genius. These two plays, like She Stoops to Conquer, are still great stage favorites.\(^{11}\)

According to Neilson, Goldsmith's two comedies, The Good Natured Man and She Stoops to Conquer, met with opposition because the fashion was then for sentimental ingredients. A few years later, Sheridan's Rivals and

School for Scandal were brilliant successes of the same type, very much like the comedies of Moliere or of Congreve with the grossness omitted. The two plays of Sheridan and She Stoops to Conquer are the only plays of the eighteenth century that have been kept alive upon our modern stage. Curiously, though, there were many sentimental comedies during the first part of the eighteenth century but none had enduring merit. It appears from Chamberlain's explanation that the farce comedy, depending on play of words, mechanical devices, and other not strictly dramatic techniques, triumphed over the more genteel type of comedy as did Goldsmith's comedies built up largely on "dramatic irony". He had his character speak lines that had one meaning for him and the audience, while it had quite a different meaning for another character on the stage. Goldsmith had his comedy of "sentiment" produce laughter rather than "pity" which in other playwrights tended to produce monotony rather than mirth.

Following the dramatic triumphs of Goldsmith and Sheridan, the literature of the Romantic age was peculiarly undramatic. It has been said that never in English

During the early years of the Victorian Era drama remained more or less dull and uninteresting, dramatists were few and generally mediocre. Even where the theatre improved, the plays were revivals and little interest was shown in the production of new dramas. There was a brief revival of the comedy of manners, but from the time of Goldsmith and Sheridan to the emergence of Wilde, Jones, and Pinero in the last two decades of the nineteenth century no play of real merit had found its way to the stage. Wilde won a secure niche in the succession of dramatists with his series of brilliant comedies. In his work he brings about a happy combination of the French "well made" play and the forms of Restoration drama, but he owes his greatest debt to Congreve for his pungent wit and fragile grace. Wilde excelled in beautiful style and in demonstrating the power of beautiful speech in the theatre; furthermore, he has written the most brilliant dramatic dialogue in the language. Even though the constant display of verbal fireworks becomes a bit tiresome and artificing, it should be remembered that artificiality has always been a distinguishing characteristic of the comedy of manners. Although Whitman is not an admirer of Wilde, he admits the following:
Whatever may be the merits of the poetry, novels and essays of Wilde, it is in the drama that he attained his highest level of achievement, and made the most important contribution to the literature of his day. He was the leader in that renaissance of the English drama that flourished in the last decade of the nineteenth century. His plays represent an important link in the tradition of the comedy of manners that stemmed from Congreve in the seventeenth century and extended through Sheridan and Wilde to Shaw and Maugham.\textsuperscript{14}

Although it is usually difficult to designate literary periods with exact dates, it is possible to be fairly accurate, since the literary changes of this epoch correspond roughly to the political changes. The comedy of manners is being traced through:

(1) The Decline of Elizabethan Drama (1612-1642);
(2) The Suppression of Drama under the Puritans (1642-1660);
(3) Restoration Drama (1660-1700);
(4) Sentimental Drama (1700-1780);
(5) Undramatic Age (1780-1840);
(6) Victorian Age (1840-1900).

At the end of the first period, Ben Jonson went to contemporary life for his subject matter, producing what is known as the comedy of manners, which portrayed manners and follies since humor came to mean a charac-

\textsuperscript{14} Charles Huntington Whitman, \textit{Representative English Dramas}, VII, IX, 5, 6, 7.
teristic quality, fad or fashion.

Thus Jonson in his comedies could expose, ridicule and censure life. During the second period, the Puritans, due to their desire to "purify" conditions in England, succeeded in closing all the theatres in 1642. In the third period, Charles II returned from France and his followers brought back dramatic practices. Refinement was lacking; characteristics rather than characters were portrayed. Plays were superficial, yet amusing. Their lighter plays belong to the comedy of manners. In the fourth period are found sentimental dramas, or comedies of pity. Where Restoration comedy laughed at distress, sentimental comedy wept over it, and virtue took the place of vice. The fifth period is responsible for a revival of earlier plays. This new interest in comedy is due to Wilde, Pinero, and Jones. This revival was a forshadowing of our present age in modern drama.

Whitman speaks thus, concerning Wilde, Pinero, and Jones:

It was these accomplished artists who introduced into England many of the better features of the continental dramaturgy and with their sound craftsmanship and literary taste, succeeded in lifting the English drama once more to a respectable position among the fine arts. 15

15. Ibid., XI.
OSCAR WILDE'S INFLUENCE ON THE COMEDY OF MANNERS

In order to understand the various conditions that influenced the writings of Oscar Wilde, it would be well to note briefly his early environment and education.

The Encyclopedia Britannica states that Oscar O'Flahertie Wills Wilde, son of Sir William Wilde, a famous surgeon, was born in Dublin on the 15th of October, 1856. His mother, who wrote under the pen name of Sperranza, was well known for both prose and poetry. After finishing a classical course at Trinity College, Oscar Wilde attended Magdalen College, Oxford, where in 1878, he won the Newdigate prize with his poem Ravenna.

Wilde's career at Oxford was especially outstanding for the part he played in the aesthetic movement. He was intellectually brilliant but professed an effeminate attitude. He cast scorn on manly sports, wearing his hair long, decorating his room with peacock's feathers, sunflowers, lilies, blue china and other objects of art. He professed intense emotions on the subject of "art for art's sake", which was then a new-fangled doctrine that J. N. Whistler had brought into prominence. Wilde became an apostle of the new cult and made himself ridiculous. Fellow students ducked him in the Cherwell and wrecked
his room but the cult continued to spread among certain classes of society. Although the cult was practically killed by ridicule, Oscar Wilde as the leading "aesthete" became one of the most prominent personalities of the day. In spite of the ridicule which he encountered, Wilde's affected paradoxes and his witty sayings were quoted both in Europe and America. In 1883 he went on a lecturing tour to the United States. Two years later he was married to Constance Lloyd.

In 1881 he published a selection of his poems which attracted attention only in limited circles. In 1888 appeared The Happy Prince and Other Tales, a volume of fairy tales which was followed by a second collection, The House of Pomegranates (1892). Wilde acknowledged that these stories were neither intended for the British child nor the British public. In much of his writing and in his general attitude, many people saw an undertone of suggestiveness which created a prejudice against him. The Picture of Dorian Gray, (1891) while it sparkled with cleverness was colored with improprieties. Wilde's contributions to the reviews were marked by his peculiar attitudes called Intentions.

Wilde's first real success as a dramatist was achieved with Lady Windermere's Fan in 1892, followed by a Woman of No Importance, 1893, An Ideal Husband, 1895,
and *The Importance of Being Earnest* during the same year. Dramatic ability was shown in these plays, but in 1893 the licensor of plays refused a license to Wilde's *Salome*. Later it was produced in Paris by Sarah Bernhardt in 1894. His success as a dramatist was lessened due to suspicion excited by his apparent looseness of morals. But in 1895 Wilde's friends, who had ceased to give credit to any scandal, were shocked when fatal revelations were made at the Old Bailey against him. He was sentenced to two years imprisonment with hard labor for offenses under the Criminal Law Amendment Act. While in prison he wrote an apology for his life. This explanation was placed in the hands of his executor and published in 1905. In 1898 he published his powerful *Ballad of Reading Goal*. His *Collected Poems* were published in 1905.

Even after leaving prison, Wilde was an outcast from respectable society. It was a sad end to what might have been a brilliant career. After his prison term, he lived on the Continent under the assumed name of "Sebastian Melmoth". He died in Paris, October 30th, 1900.

It is difficult to take a purely objective view of Oscar Wilde's work. The revelation at The Old Bailey showed that his personal influence was essentially unhealthy, but his literary genius was none the less note-
worthy. His plays were the most original contribution to the English drama during the period.  

Oscar Wilde is distinguished for his beautiful classic speech, brilliant dialogue, glittering wit, polished phrases, graceful style, gentle satire, clever irony, and perfectly turned epigrams in a comedy of manners which is a combination of the French "well-made" play and forms of the Restoration drama.

The discourse throughout Wilde's comedies is freed from the vulgarities that are prevalent in the earlier comedies of manners, especially those of Congreve and even the later comedies of Goldsmith and Sheridan. Wilde's conversation shows an improvement over that which was used during the Victorian period, which cannot boast of any dramas. Algernon speaks, as do all of Wilde's characters, with nicely chosen words. The sentences are varied and comparatively short. The statements are quite direct and qualified. Then a question is asked, apparently, for emphasis. The paragraph is concluded with a pointed statement.

Algernon: Well, I don't like your clothes. You look perfectly ridiculous in them. Why on earth don't you go up and change? It is perfectly childish to be in deep mourning for a man who is

---

actually staying for a whole week in your house as your guest. I call it grotesque. 2

Sheridan has not succeeded so well in curbing emotions. His characters are not restrained in disappointment as are Wilde's. Captain Absolute finds himself in a trying situation. He does not use the polished and witty discourse that Algernon employed. He is more vulgar and bitter, but he is clever in the choice of emphatic words.

Abs.: Mild, gentle, considerate father— I kiss your hands! — What a tender method of giving his opinion in these matters Sir Anthony has! I dare not trust him with the truth.— I wonder what old wealthy hag it is that he wants to bestow on me!— Yet he married himself for love! and was in his youth a bold intriguer, and a gay companion! 3

Goldsmith's diction is more like that of Sheridan than of Wilde. The following lines indicate the relationship:

Hardcastle. Blessings on my pretty innocence! Drest out as usual, my Kate. Goodness! What a quantity of superfluous silk thou hast about thee, girl! I could never teach the fools of this age that the indigent world could be clothed out of trimmings of the vain. 4

The diction and the brilliant dialogue of Wilde

2. Oscar Wilde, The Importance of Being Earnest,


4. Oliver Goldsmith, She Stoops to Conquer, 256.
contrast strikingly with the more commonplace discourse of other writers such as those quoted. Wilde also excels in witty speeches.

Jack. My dear Algy, 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 false impressions. 5

Contrast that speech of Wilde with the wit of both Goldsmith and Sheridan:

Hardcastle. This fellow's formal modest impudence is beyond bearing! 6

Captain Absolute. Well, take care you don't hurt your credit by offering too much security. 7

Not only has Wilde been fortunate with his wit, he has been careful in modeling and polishing his phrases. They are pleasing not only to the ear and eye but to the intellect.

My dear fellow, what is there in that? Some aunts are tall, some aunts are not tall. That is a matter that surely an aunt may be allowed to decide for herself. 8

A few lines quoted from The Rivals will show that the speeches are more drawn out and complicated in Sheridan's dialogue than are those of Goldsmith and Wilde.

Lydia. No, upon my word.—She really carries on a kind of correspondence with him, under a feigned name though, till she chooses to be known to him;—but it is a Delia or a Celia, I assure you.  

Wilde has the Duchess of Berwick say, "Sweet girl! So devoted to sunsets! Shows such refinement of feeling, does it not? After all, there is nothing like nature, is there?"  

Mr. Hardcastle is more sarcastic in his comments, "Ay, and bring back vanity and affectation to last them a whole year. I wonder why London cannot keep its own fools at home!"  

Mrs. Maloprop upon Lydia's retort, "I cannot change for the worse", says, "There's a little intricate hussy for you!"  

Wilde is especially clever in the use of dramatic irony. Algernon has eaten the cucumber sandwiches which he told Lane to prepare for Aunt Augusta. When Aunt Augusta enters and notices the empty plate she exclaims:  

Good heavens! Lane! Why are there no cucumber sandwiches? I ordered them especially! (Before Algernon is able to answer, Lane breaks in.) No,  

12. Richard B. Sheridan, op. cit., 89.
sir. Not even for ready money, were there any cucumbers in the market this morning.
Mrs. Bracknell. It really makes no matter, Algernon.13

Shakespeare used tragic dramatic irony when the conspirators came to fetch Caesar to the Senate House. Caesar, entirely unsuspecting any wrong said, "I thank you for your pains and courtesy."14

The perfectly turned epigrams of Oscar Wilde make a pleasing contrast to epigrams of other authors. Even Wilde's half-truths are stated in such a way that they are convincing. To Lady Bracknell's comment that Lady Harbury seems to be living entirely for pleasure, Algernon retorts, "I hear her hair has turned quite gold from grief".15

The epigram is made more impressive by the alliteration and poetic diction. Next we will notice some epigrams from other authors. Wilde's compare with those of Shakespeare and of other generally accepted literary authorities.

"To know my deed, 't were best not know my-

"You may as well say that's a valiant flea that dare eat his breakfast on the lip of a lion." Wilde's epigrams are not unlike those of classic authors. Shakespeare's epigrams occur in poetry; Wilde's are unique in ordinary prose.

Wilde's classic speech, his wit, his epigrams, and clever satire create for him a graceful style which is characterized by his perfect ease in saying things. Throughout the comedies there is a stimulated vein which is apparent to the very end of the play. The Importance of Being Earnest keeps up the pun till the end and closes with Jack's play on words, when he replies to Aunt Augusta's remark:

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.

Wilde's style then is achieved principally through the charm of his classic handling of diction and ideas.

Since The Importance of Being Earnest represents Wilde's highest level in the comedy of manners, it will


be studied first and compared with other representative dramatists. Immediately the staging, music, and setting put us in an atmosphere not unlike that of a modern play; there seems to be nothing earnest from the outset; at once the play on words is apparent. The conversation is light and sparkling with wit. The humor is brought about by suggesting improbabilities. Algernon in a smiling rebuke to his servant, Lane, who has just said that he knows little about marriage since he has only been married once, says as he leaves the stage:

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.19

The sentences are made up of short phrases and abrupt changes. To Algernon's question, "What brings you to town?", Jack replies, "Oh, pleasure, pleasure! What else should bring one anywhere? Eating as usual, I see, Algy!"20 Here we have exclamation, questions and pointed statements, all in those few words. The immediate change of topic while a question is being answered tends to keep up interest and creates a rather humorous atmosphere.

20. Ibid., 4.
Wilde has a method unique in suggesting absurdities or in stating facts in such a way that at first they seem untruths. Jack says to Algernon who has apprehended some silly verses which have been written to Jack: "More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn't read." Just shortly before Algernon has ingeniously brought in a reference suggestive of the earlier comedies which made "ungenteel" remarks concerning courtship. Wilde has used a more refining sense in dealing with it than did earlier dramatists, nor has he applied such vulgar epithets to women. Wilde has Algernon say,

Well, in the first place, girls never marry the men they flirt with. Girls don't think it right. It accounts for the extraordinary number of bachelors that one sees all over the place.

The audience has not been told that both men on the stage are bachelors. Algernon has used veiled sarcasm in alluding to their being unmarried men.

Throughout the play there is a hint of pleasant trickery and farce, but nowhere is the farce or intrigue just like that found in the Restoration comedy or that of later dramatists. Both Algernon and Jack, have clev-
erly laid schemes to deceive the other. Like the Spanish comedies of intrigue, there are maidens for whose affections these youths are suing, but Wilde has succeeded in creating a humorous situation rather than in portraying characters of vulgar types and of more vulgar emotions. The following lines show Wilde's ability to be witty, to create an atmosphere of suspense in which he has invented imaginary characters.

Algernon. You have invented a very useful younger brother called Ernest, in order that you may be able to come to town as often as you like. I have invented an invaluable permanent invalid called Bunbury, in order that I may be able to go down into the country whenever I choose. If it wasn't for Bunbury's extraordinary bad health for instance, I wouldn't be able to dine with you at Willis's tonight, for I have been really engaged to Aunt Augusta for more than a week.23

The dialogue concerning "Ernest" gives us quite an insight into Wilde's technique; the character painting is more outstanding than the plot; the play on words, more important than the story.

Algernon. You have always told me that your name is Ernest. You answer to the name of Ernest. You look as if your name was Ernest. You are the most earnest looking person I ever saw in my life. It is perfectly absurd your saying that your name isn't Ernest. It's on your card.24

23. Ibid., 10.
24. Ibid., 8.
There is sort of a climax to each sentence, then the speech is climaxed: "It's on the card."

Another thing that has made The Importance of Being Earnest different from earlier comedies in the "manner" group is the unique way in which Wilde has treated the romances which develop in the course of the play and eventually result in engagements of the two groups of lovers.

Nowhere is there shown overdrawn emotion or the display of endearing words. But there is a well planned device which ridiculed the sentimental young lady and the unprincipled young man who were feigning respectability.

Cecily. You must not laugh at me, darling, but it had always been a girlish dream of mine to love some one whose name was Ernest. (Algernon rises, Cecily also.) There is something in that name that seems to inspire absolute confidence. I pity any poor married woman whose husband is not called Ernest.25

Algernon replies with a pun on aristocratic ideals and manners and irony toward the systems of court procedure.

Well, my own dear, sweet, loving little darling, I really can't see why you should object to the name of Algernon. It is not at all a bad name. In fact, it is rather an aristocratic name. Half of the chaps who get into the Bankruptcy Court

25. Ibid., 45.
are called Algernon. In the above speeches Wilde used mild satire. He seemed to smile at those to whom an aristocratic name meant everything.

When Cecily was asked, "If my name was Algy, couldn't you love me?", Cecily replied, "I might respect you, Ernest, I might admire your character, but I fear that I should not be able to give you my undivided attention."  

Wilde's pairs of lovers are quite different from the characters used by Goldsmith and Sheridan and of considerably different type from those found in Restoration comedies and in the "humour types" of Ben Jonson, during the Elizabethan age. Both Algernon and Jack are living in two different societies. At home they are the young men that their friends would wish them to be, and abroad they are just the opposite. When Algernon wishes to go out "incognito", he goes Bunburying, and when Jack is not at home, he is "Ernest."

Goldsmith employs a trick to endear the particular characters whom he designates as lovers. Sheridan, too, employs rather a sly hand in romancing; he has the

26. Ibid., 46.
27. Ibid., 46.
elders picking out the partners. This first causes con-
 sternation to both young people. But Captain Absolute
 is extremely overjoyed when he discovers that instead of
 an ugly lady with a lump on each shoulder, his father is
 forcing him to marry the very girl with whom he was plot-
ting to elope. Lydia on the other hand is furious. Her
 joy seemed to have been in out-witting her relations.

Lydia. So while I fondly imagined we were de-
 ceiving my relations, and flattered myself that
 I should outwit and incense them all—behold my
 hopes are to be crushed at once, by my aunt's
 consent and approbation—and I myself the only
dupe at the last.28

Wilde has treated this mood of laughing at the
fickleness of human nature and the follies of society
with more grace and ease than did Sheridan. He has ex-
pressed likenesses and comparisons between unlike things
and ideas so as to produce more amusing surprises. In
response to Jack's explanation that he had either lost
his parents or that they had lost him in the Brighton
station, Gwendolen's mother, Lady Bracknell, retorts:

The line is immaterial. Mr. Worthington, I con-
fess I feel somewhat bewildered by what you have
just told me. 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 ordi-
nary decencies of family life that reminded one
of the worst excesses of the French Revolution.

28. Richard Brinsley Sheridan, The Rivals, Act
IV, Scene II, 123.
And I presume you know what that unfortunate movement led to.

Throughout the questioning of Jack, who is Gwen-dolen's suitor, Lady Bracknell asks only a few questions that one would ordinarily expect her to ask. And to these questions she is pleased with an answer which one would expect her to scorn.

Lady Bracknell. . . . Do you smoke?
Jack. Well, yes, I must admit I smoke.
Lady Bracknell. I am glad to hear it. A man should always have an occupation of some kind. There are far too many idle men in London as it is. How old are you?

Always there is a surprise in the turn of the conversation. Some times it is just the abrupt change in thought, or a question on a different topic.

She Stoops to Conquer represents Goldsmith's greatest accomplishment in drama and is a "manner" comedy in the same class as Wilde's. Yet the wit, the amusing surprises, and the epigrams are not so appealing and most often the humor is entirely based on improbabilities.

Miss Hardcastle. What an unaccountable creature is that brother of mine, to send them to the house as an inn, ha! ha! I don't wonder at his impudence.
Maid. But what is more, madam, the young gentle-

30. Ibid., 18.
man, as you passed by in your present dress, asked me if you were a bar-maid. He mistook you for the bar-maid, madam. 31

There is certainly nothing in the above lines that would suggest the sparkling wit and polished phrases of Wilde. Still Goldsmith's "manner" comedies are considered an improvement over the Jonsonian "humours" and the Restoration intrigues.

The theme of The Importance of Being Earnest, as in most of the comedies of manners, is love. Sheridan has pointed out in his epilogue to The Rivals just about what themes and characters were necessary for the plays and dramas.

Ladies, for you—I heard our poet say—He'd try to coax some moral from his play!
'One moral's plain', cried I, without more fuss;
Man's social happiness all rests on us:
Through all the drama—whether damned or not—Love gilds the scene, and women guide the plot. 32

There is some likeness in the manner in which Goldsmith, Sheridan and Wilde complicate the incidents so that a woman guides the plot. In The Rivals, the lady, whom Captain Absolute calls romantic, devilish romantic, and very absurd because she likes him better as half-pay ensign than as an heir to Sir Anthony Absolute,

32. Ibid., 48.
keeps up a comic atmosphere throughout by her absurd attitude. Wilde's Gwendoline, on the other hand, is disturbed because Jack is not "Earnest." Her speeches and the author's play on words, help to heighten the effect of the comedy. Goldsmith has Miss Hardcastle disguise herself in order to take Marlow off his guard, since he is determined to dislike her. She is dressed in the costume of a maid and affects that roll, thus the title, *She Stoops to Conquer*—and she does conquer. Earlier in the Restoration comedies the dialogues were more sentimental and less witty; the romancing was too silly to be humorous. Earlier in Jonson's comedies there was little love making. Dryden says of him:

As for Jonson . . . In his works you find little to retrench or alter. Wit, and language, and humor also in some measure, we have before him; but something of art was wanting to the Drama, till he came. He managed his strength to more advantage than any who preceded him. You seldom find him making love in any of his scenes, or endeavoring to move the passions;—his genius was too sullen and saturnine to do it gracefully, especially when he knew that he came after those who had performed both to such a height. Humor was his proper sphere; and in that he delighted most to represent mechanical people. . . . Shakespeare was the Homer or father of our dramatic poets; Jonson was the Virgil, the pattern of elaborate writing; I admire him but I love Shakespeare. To conclude of him: as he has given us the most correct plays, so in the precepts which he has laid down in his "Discoveries," we have as many and profitable rules for perfecting the stage, as any wherewith the French
It will be seen from the above that Jonson was more concerned with a peculiar characteristic than he was with persons or characters. Too, he was aided by Shakespeare's example and went even further as to technique but he was not as clever in creating such witty situations as was Shakespeare. Jonson's aim was to satirize some whim or fancy of society. In his comedy, Volpone, there is a merciless analysis of a man who is miserly and loves only his gold.

Volpone. Good morning to the day; and next, my gold! Open the shrine that I may see my saint.

(A curtain is withdrawn and Mosca discovers piles of gold.) Hail the world's soul and mine!

This characterization is convincing and seems not to have the absurdities that were prevalent in many comedies. Sheridan has tried to ridicule the people of his time who try to appear learned and experienced. Mrs. Malaprop is continually using the wrong word; the absurdity is amusing but is not so convincing as a less exaggerated characterization would be. Lady Bracknell is rather to be censured for her flimsy standards, but Wilde carefully desisted from overdrawing her characteristics.


as did Sheridan in depicting Mrs. Malaprop.

Lady Bracknell. This noise is extremely unpleasant. It sounds as if he was having an argument. I dislike arguments of any kind. They are always vulgar and often convincing.  

These lines contrast strikingly with the exaggerated diction of Sheridan's characters especially that of Mrs. Malaprop.

There, sir, an attack upon my language! What do you think of that? An aspersion upon my parts of speech! Was ever such a brute! Sure, if I reprehend any thing in this world, it is the use of my oracular tongue, and a nice derangement of epitaphs.

Wilde is not only fortunate in his graceful diction, but the thought is generally climaxed in an epigram which if not always convincing is extremely pleasing. The purpose of the comedy of manners is to laugh at the extravagances of those in high society, but Wilde has succeeded in laughing with them rather than at them. Throughout *The Importance of Being Earnest* the interest is kept up until the end and then the play on the word "Earnest" is humorously contrasted with the word "trivial".

*An Ideal Husband* though, not ranking as high as

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The Importance of Being Earnest, has many of the dramatic qualities for which Wilde is remembered, but it is lacking in close-knit dialogue and action, which are found in The Importance of Being Earnest. The polished phrases, select diction, and epigrams are again signs of Wilde's workmanship. True to his characteristic theme, love prevails. A number of complications develop as a result. In this drama as in Wilde's other comedies, the follies of society are ridiculed. He has shown how society is unwilling to believe anything wrong about one it has idealized. Lady Chiltern cannot be convinced that her husband is anything but her ideal. She exclaims, "Robert must be above reproach. He is not like other men. He can not afford to do what other men do."  

There is a problem and sort of a plot in An Ideal Husband. The fact is that Sir Robert Chiltern is dishonest and creates a situation that he tries to conceal from his wife. The climax is reached when his deception is made public. But he has a reply that makes each reader ponder and answer for himself:

Why do you place us on a monstrous pedestal? We all have feet of clay, women as well as men... It is not the perfect, but the imperfect, who have need of love. It is when we are wounded by our own hands, or by the hands of others, that

37. Oscar Wilde, An Ideal Husband, 192.
love should come to cure us—else what use is love at all? . . . Women think they are making ideals of men. What they are making of us are false idols merely. You made your false idol of me, and I had not the courage to come down, show you my wounds, tell you my weaknesses, . . . . Let women make no more ideals of men! Let them not put them on altars and bow before them, or they may ruin other lives as completely as you—you whom I have so wildly loved—have ruined mine. 38

This comedy, as well as the greater number of Wilde's plays, shows the vein of thought that most often pervaded his lines,—the weakness of some character, most often—a woman. In characterization, Wilde did not excel, but he did excel in pleasing diction, clear wit, and pleasant satire.

Oliver Goldsmith, whom Wilde seems to have admired, succeeded in producing a comedy of manners. He did not choose so many pitiable characters, but he did select those that were just as extremely funny. She Stoops to Conquer is a good example of Goldsmith's ability to produce humorous situations and to picture characters who are just naturally doing and saying the most absurd things.

Tony Lumpkin is represented as scarcely able to read his own name, yet he has helped to produce much of the mirth in the play and many puns that are found in

38. Ibid., 208-9.
the play are thought out by Tony. He puns on the use of fingers to get his mother's bureau open.

Tony. Ask me no questions, and I'll tell you no fibs. I procured them by the rule of thumb. If I had not a key to every drawer in mother's bureau, how could I go to the ale house so often as I do? An honest man may rob himself of his own at any time.39

In the ability to use figurative language Wilde excels, and he perhaps would have done better with the lines about the "ale house" than Goldsmith did. Wilde would have left out the word "ale house"; or perhaps, just hinted at it. Algernon has not told what business he has referred to: "That is a great disappointment. I am obliged to go up by first train on Monday morning. I have a business appointment that I am anxious . . . to miss."40

Lady Windermere's Fan is studied next, since it gives to Wilde the distinction of being the first among British writers to bring in the idea of problem plays and of plays with "ideas". The present day dramas carry on that tradition of problems and thesis, and Wilde's idea of a skillfully articulated plot.

The British Drama by Leider, Lovett, and Root has

the following concerning Wilde:

"Lady Windermere's Fan," like "The School for Scandal," is a literary descendant of Restoration comedy. It is a comedy of manners and of wit. Sheridan, we have seen, introduced into this type of artificial comedy a certain amount of sentiment, even though he was fighting the growing sentimentality of the drama; and he surpassed most Restoration playwrights in making his plots compact. Wilde went even farther. Many situations in "Lady Windermere's Fan" are downright emotional only kept within bounds by his skill in leading up to, and retreating from the scene; and his skillfully articulated plot is one of the most brilliant examples of sheer craftsmanship in the British theater. In addition, Wilde gave this comedy the air of a "problem play," of a "play with ideas," by introducing, in most cases naturally, epigrams and comments upon life. But it is Wilde's wit and especially his technique after all, rather than his treatment of social problems, that make this play memorable.

In Lady Windermere's Fan, as in "well made" plays, there is considerable stage direction given. The stage is planned by the dramatist, and immediately the problems which are to make up the plot are introduced. Lady Windermere's fan, with her name on it, is noted, at the outset. The first act has a modern atmosphere, beginning thus, as the following epigram will show. Lord Darlington says, "Ah, now-a-days we are all of us so hard up, that the only pleasant things to pay are compliments. They're

the only thing we can pay."\(^{42}\)

Like the diction in Wilde's other plays this one has a carefully selected vocabulary and sparkling wit with epigrammic climaxes. The sentences ordinarily are short, but effective. The following epigram is well known and often quoted: Lord Darlington says, "I could not help it. I can resist everything except temptation."\(^{43}\)

As the above lines suggest there is an undertone of suspicion throughout the play. Several times it has been suggested to Lady Windermere that her husband is not loyal to her. Finally she is convinced of his deceit; thus the plot becomes more complicated. Just in this very building of a plot comes Wilde's important contribution to the comedy of manners. Early comedies did not have problems and plots, but relied on wit, satire and light jokes to keep up the interest. The plot is certainly well filled with problems and their solution is not accomplished until the very end. There is more real fun in She Stoops to Conquer or in The Importance of Being Earnest, but this mirth is due to the witty phrases, epigrams and absurdities of characteristics that are satirized. The plays keep us laughing but in Lady Windermere's Fan, 80.\(^{42}\) "

\(^{42}\) Oscar Wilde, Lady Windermere's Fan, 80.

\(^{43}\) Ibid., 84.
mere's Fan we are held tense with interest until the end.

Lord Darlington suggests that since Lady Windermere's husband is associating with doubtful characters, she is justified in doing wrong. Lady Windermere asks this question, and replies:

Because a husband is vile, should the wife be vile also? . . . . You think I am a Puritan, I suppose? Well, I have something of the Puritan in me. I was brought up like that. I am glad of it. My mother died when I was a mere child. I lived always with Lady Julia, my father's eldest sister, you know. She was stern to me, but she taught me what the world is forgetting, the difference that there is between what is right and what is wrong. She allowed of no compromise. I allow of no compromise. 44

Here we have the "ideas" or the ideals that become the problem in this comedy of manners. It is a contest between idealists who are forcing high standards on all, and no exceptions are made for any class; on the other side are the so-called social classes, who care not for virtue but pretend to be shielded by its graces.

Still there is another problem, that of giving scandal to the weak. Wilde seems to suggest this tragedy by saying rather ironically, "Nothing looks so like innocence as indiscretion." 45 It was explained that Lady Windermere's mother had not lived as a good mother does

44. Ibid., 82-83.
45. Ibid., 111.
in the sacrificing for and the training of her child.
She had paid no attention to her daughter; never claimed
her. Finally, refined society excluded this unnatural
mother from its drawing rooms. In desperation she tried
to ingratiate herself by secretly forcing Lord Windermere
to introduce her into his social groups. This he
did lest Mrs. Erlynne would publicly claim Lady Windermere
as her daughter.

Then comes the other problem—that of heredity. Thus far Mrs. Erlynne has shown no characteristics of a
mother. In this very thing Wilde has brought in what
some critics call an absurd situation, but at the end of
the play, after Mrs. Erlynne has nearly wrecked the life
of her daughter, she realizes that human nature is weak:

No, no! It would be impossible! Life doesn't
repeat its tragedies like that! . . . Oh, how
terrible the same words that twenty years ago I
wrote to her father! And how bitterly I have
been punished for it.46

The fan which was mentioned in the beginning of
the play was carried by Lady Windermere and dropped
thoughtlessly by her, in an apartment, where no lady
should have been late at night. Mrs. Erlynne becomes a
heroine now in taking the blame. Here Wilde again has
used dramatic irony.

46. Ibid., 113-14.
(To Lord W.) How do you do? Do you know, Lady 
Windermere, I am so sorry about your fan. I 
can't imagine how I made such a silly mistake. 
Most stupid of me. And as I was driving in 
your direction, I thought I would take the op-
portunity of returning your property in person, 
with many apologies for my carelessness, and 
of bidding you good-bye. 47

Finally, near the end of the drama Lord Windem-
mere tells the secret that has shrouded his actions and 
caused his wife pain. He addresses Mrs. Erlynne:

For twenty years of your life you lived without 
your child, without a thought of your child. 
One day you read in the papers that she had mar-
rried a rich man. You saw your hideous chance. 
You knew that to spare her the ignominy of 
learning that a woman like you was her mother, 
I would endure anything. You began your black-
mailing. ... A mother's love means devotion, 
unselfishness, sacrifice. What could you know 
of such things? 48

In this play, as in The Importance of Being Ear-
nest, the beautiful phrasing and epigrammic speech con-
tinue to the very end. There is finally a happy ending. 
Lord Windermere promises never to tell the secret and his 
wife proves grateful for the kindness this stranger has 
shown her.

Lord Windermere says of Mrs. Erlynne, "A clever 
woman," while Lady Windermere concludes, a "very good

47. Ibid., 134-35.
48. Ibid., 137-40.
In *A Woman of No Importance*, Wilde has created a wicked, idle, unscrupulous, epigrammic, and exotic character in Lord Illingworth. The author created enough interest in such types that he felt excused from finding real characters. Lord Illingworth, no doubt, meant that he had a future when he uttered this epigrammic remark, "The only difference between the saint and the sinner is that every saint has a past, and every sinner has a future." This is just another example of Wilde's ability to express unpleasant ideas in a happy manner, and he does at times throw out a bit of advice:

Lord Illingworth. Don't be afraid, Gerald. Remember that you've got on your side the most wonderful thing in the world—youth. There is nothing like youth. The middle-aged are mortgaged to Life. The old are in Life's lumber-room. But youth is the Lord of life. Youth has a kingdom waiting for it. Every one is born a king, and most people die in exile like most kings. To win back my youth, Gerald, there is nothing I wouldn't do.

The *Theatre Arts*, April, 1939, carried an article by Sewell Stokes concerning the plays of Oscar Wilde. His statements corroborate with those of earlier critics.

49. Ibid., 146.
51. Ibid., 298.
Both Abraham Lincoln and Oscar Wilde knew how to hold an audience and for that reason they are good dramatic material. They can be made to talk well on the stage because they talked well in real life.52

In the same issue of the magazine Ashley Dukes shows that the plays of Oscar Wilde, especially The Importance of Being Earnest, hold a place on the modern stage as well as do the newer dramas:

The Gielgud matinees of The Importance of Being Earnest, given at the Globe, proved that Wilde's comedy has as much vitality as The Playboy itself. It is hard to cast and perform because its special character implies a surrender in every player, of what is habitual on the stage—'personality' most of all—to the art of talking nonsense gravely and knowing that it is nonsense and remaining grave.53

The Fortnightly Review, September, 1938, carried the following:

Bernard Shaw's attempt to persuade the world that Frank Harris's Oscar Wilde is the authoritative work on Wilde, the book by which Wilde's memory must stand or fall, is as strange a story as literary history contains.

Shaw said that Wilde's memory must stand or fall by Harris's facts, which characterized Wilde in his last years as 'an unproductive drunkard and swindler.' Yet in his talk with Pearson, immediately after this letter, Shaw, referring to some sketches by Harris of himself and other English writers

52. Sewell Stokes, Theatre Arts, XXXIII, 270, Apr., 1939.

53. Ashley Dukes, Ibid., 253.
said: 'He is really a frightful liar, writing imaginary conversations in an imaginary character, with odd little bits of actual reminiscence in them.'

So at the outset of Shaw's connection with Harris's Wilde, we are in the presence of the still unsolved problem why Shaw should consider Harris an unimpeachable authority on Wilde, but a frightful liar about everyone else.

Irishmen are seldom susceptible to one another's charm, and there were many reasons, some valid, why Shaw should not care for Wilde. His sentiment for Harris was also understandable. If Wilde was the hare in the race for fame and Shaw the tortoise, Harris was a bull who had charged onto the course, killing a score of spectators, broken all records for the hundred yards, charged off again, and been found dead in a ditch. A tortoise would be rather taken by a bull who behaved like that.54

Later evidence shows that Wilde did not only prepare the way for modern plays and playwrights but that his comedies are still produced and enjoyed. During the first days of January, 1940, a number of newspapers carried articles concerning the publishing of a new book by Frances Winwar, entitled Oscar Wilde and the Yellow Nineties. The Saturday Review of Literature of March 23, 1940, published a review of the book, by Ernest Boyd, a journalist, and a literary critic. He says in part:

With this, the fourth volume of her tetralogy dealing with the esthetic movements of the nineteenth century in England, Miss Winwar has bril-

liantly concluded an ambitious and interesting task. 'Farewell the Banner' started the series with Coleridge and Wordsworth, 'The Romantic Rebels' gave us Byron, Shelley, and Keats, and 'Poor Splendid Wings' succeeded in arousing popular interest in the Rossettis and their circle. The field is obviously one which has often been explored before, but Miss Winwar has the original talent to make her subject her own and, for that reason, she can take so hackneyed a theme as the eighteen-nineties, so over-written a personality as Oscar Wilde, and produce a book which is a scholarly portrait of an era and an intensely dramatic narrative.

Ernest Boyd says that no other author except Frank Harris has been unbiased enough to give Wilde his just place with contemporaries. Miss Winwar goes even further and gives attention to this doomed figure who strode the narrow London world like a colossus.

The most conclusive proof that a play is modern, and that it has an appeal to youth, is its use for present day radio production. Carless Jones of the Department of Dramatic Art, University of New Mexico, received a copyright in 1939 for a work entitled, Short Plays For Stage and Radio. The Importance of Being Earnest is cleverly arranged therein. Episode I begins:

Sound: (Theme music up 10 seconds and under.)
Announcer: . . . Brings you now the first of three episodes of The Importance of Being Earnest by

Oscar Wilde, in a radio adaptation by Carless Jones.

From coast to coast and back again, and throughout the English-speaking world this comedy has amused thousands of theatre-goers. There is a distinct French influence in its plot construction, and Mr. Wilde goes back into theatre history even farther when he uses confused identity as the main plot hinge. But regardless of whence it came, the stuff that this play is made of is still fresh and spontaneous, even after fifty years; and it has become one of the classics of the English stage.

As the play opens we are in London, in the sumptuous apartment of Mr. Algernon Moncrieff, a young man of considerable fortune, and not much else. The butler has entered the drawing room and is preparing to announce a caller.

Sound: (Music out.)

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

The English dramatist and poet, Oscar Wilde, was fortunate in that his drama appeared at a time when dramatists no longer flourished in England. After the magnificent Elizabethan period, English drama had waned; it was revived briefly in the eighteenth century in the form of the comedy of manners. From the time of Goldsmith's two comedies, *The Good Natured Man* and *She Stoops to Conquer*, and Sheridan's *The Rivals*, no play of real merit had appeared on the English stage until the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Goldsmith's plays marked a return to the comedy of manners and were bristling with wit and fun. He and Sheridan are the only Eighteenth century playwrights that have remained alive, and they are seldom acted on the stage.

After the barrenness of the Victorian period, the comedies of Wilde emerged and were hailed with delight by audiences which had been wearied by common-place productions which dealt neither with life nor literature. Authors and research workers of note agree that Wilde was instrumental in restoring distinction to the stage when it was barren of anything really literary or dram-
atic. He has won a secure niche in the dramatic succession with his series of brilliant comedies, and his contribution has definitely aided in the renaissance of the theatre.

Wilde's contribution to the comedy of manners stands as a great pillar which threw light into future literary circles. It was over a hundred years after Goldsmith's literary revival that Wilde's comedy of manners came as a help to European and American dramatists to carry on the tradition of comedy in literary and theatrical circles.

Holbrook Jackson said that Wilde's intellect was dramatic and that the whole man was not so much a personality as an attitude. He affected the attitude of a sage without being a sage; he affected the attitude of an artist without being an artist. And it was precisely in his affectation that he was most sincere. These attitudes or affectations represented his intentions, his unrealized self. Thus his attitude towards life and art was untouched by his conduct. His dignified standards for an artist and his idea of beauty in the world was not invalidated by his failure to create pure beauty.

If Wilde is not remembered as an artist in English literature, he will be classed as the supreme art-
Michael Monahan suggests that the paradox pursues Oscar Wilde even after death. The revival of his plays is paradoxical as is his surviving fame. With the social anathema pronounced upon him in 1895, the man and the writer underwent a well-nigh complete occulation.

For several years thereafter, practically until his death in 1900, very little was heard of him who had "blazed the comet of the season." The publishers were "shy" of his books, or even repudiated them in answer to the public clamor, and his delightful plays were absolutely withdrawn from the theatre. Philistinism scored a signal victory over its most redoubtable foe, but as we have seen, it was not to hold.

The remark as to the interdict on his play is especially true of the theatre in England where Wilde had incurred condemnation and sentence as a moral scapegoat; but the ostracism of the poet and dramatist was hardly less drastic and effectual in this country. On the continent, however, Wilde's plays were never denied a hearing. Paris even applauded Salome while he was still in prison. It was foreigners who helped to rehabilitate Wilde in the eyes of the public.

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1. Holbrook Jackson, The Eighteen Nineties, 125.
In the foreign theatre and later in England and America his plays have acquired a classical tenure. The race for immortality is subject to gusts and flows of public opinion and other outward accidents. Whatever reproach may lie in the matter, Lady Windermere's Fan and An Ideal Husband are far more frequently acted nowadays than The School for Scandal and The Rivals. Wilde has "come back" with a brilliancy and a fulness of triumph that would have astounded his self-satisfied spirit.

Michael Monahan maintains that much has been said in and out of print regarding the Christian magnanimity of the public in taking this flagrant sinner to its bosom again after showing him very thoroughly what it could do in the way of chastisement and reprobation. It is sort of unctuous self-gratulation which the public likes to indulge in when the periodical "spasm of virtue" has passed, and it wishes to put a good face on the consequent revulsion; when it takes to its arms again, with a redoublement of passionate fondness, the idol that it rejected yesterday with killing scorn and hatred. But one may with a good conscience decline to flatter the public sensibilities in the present instance. The reversal of its attitude toward Wilde seems to be much less the effect of Christian magnanimity in itself than of literary charm in the offender. The public is not always
a fool (this is truth, not flattery!) nor can it be fooled, as has been illustriously stated, "all the time." Wilde had that to give which it could not or would not permanently put by.

And so a truce to all the homilies that have been preached or printed on the matter. Good literature has the privilege of living down a bad reputation—and Wilde's character is not the worst that might be cited to the point.

It is not pretended that Wilde brought new material to the drama, nor that he "profoundly influenced the art of the theatre," as the phrase goes, or even that he excels in novelty of situation and ingenuity of plot. His social comedy offers little more than clever apportionment of glittering dialogue among some specious marionettes. (Lady Windermere's Fan is something more and better, of course.) There can be no question that Wilde was on his way to finer achievement in the drama as he went on. But his comedies never fail to interest, in spite of the admitted tenuity of the dramatic motive.

The copy of upper-class manners is held to be sufficiently authentic, the art is more refined than Sheridan's and the paradox is utterly beyond him; moreover, the charm is always the Wildian charm which goes sans definition. Of these dramatic plays, the lightest and happiest is
the Importance of Being Earnest, which may well be called the comedy of golden, careless youth,—well-bred English youth, of course, delightfully snobbish and engaging, also wittier than is the privilege of correct society. This piece enthroned Wilde as lord of the lighter theatre, and it marks the highest point of fame and success which he had scored before his downfall.

It is as the author of so-called "society plays," brilliant, superficial, factitious and disdainfully conventional, that Wilde has most fortunately struck the public imagination, and perhaps the rehabilitation of his fame is in great part to be ascribed to these works. 5

The following article from Time, 1939, gives a good explanation concerning the characteristics of Wilde's comedies:

Old Play in Manhattan, The Importance of Being Earnest (by Oscar Wilde; produced by Richard Aldrich and Richard Myers) is 44 years old, and looks it. In a way this is a compliment, for most farces of 44 look twice their age. In Wilde's long stage joke of what happens when one young man invents a dissolute brother, there are still pleasant stretches. Lady Bracknell, "a monster without being a myth," is still an amusing snob. Miss Prism is still a funny old maid. And Wilde is still the most brilliant epigrammatist in the modern theatre, though for sustained comic dialogue he cannot hold a candle to

Shaw.\textsuperscript{6}

Whitman, however, says of Wilde, "Indeed, he has written the most brilliant dramatic dialogue in the language."\textsuperscript{7} Even though Wilde is not first in comic dialogue, he excels in dramatic dialogue which is a greater achievement.

Regardless of various prejudices, Wilde is generally accepted as a dramatist who has helped to bring dramatic significance to the theatre. Too, his diction, wit, epigrams, beautifully sustained dialogue, and interesting plot in his comedy of manners have been an inspiration to modern dramatists who have become really important. In the case of Oscar Wilde, Shakespeare's oft quoted couplet may be reversed— the good that Wilde did lives after him, the evil is interred with his bones.

Monahan thinks that Bernard Shaw's success is so emphatically due to an aggressive personality that one hardly thinks of the share Fate has had in it. But it is certain that Shaw did not begin to come into his own until Wilde's disgrace had removed the more attractive, if not more highly gifted, Irishman from the scene. In

\textsuperscript{6} Time, January 23, 1939, XXXIII, 21.

\textsuperscript{7} Charles Huntington Whitman, Representative Modern Dramas, 567.
a very real way the downfall of Wilde made room and opportunity for Shaw. A play does far more for reputation than a book—Wilde, the mere poet and essayist, might never have been won back to the light of day without his dramas.

Finally, with the approval of the stage and theatre lovers, the lucky star of Oscar Wilde is again in the ascendant with the complete retrieval of his fame and the saving of his literary achievement unto future times.8

A quotation from the Lord Douglas' Tribute to Wilde, The Eighteen Nineties, makes a fitting conclusion to this thesis.

I dreamed of him last night, I saw his face
All radiant and unshadowed of distress,
And as of old, in music measureless,
I heard his golden voice and marked him trace
Under the common thing the hidden grace,
And conjure wonder out of emptiness.
Till mean things put on beauty like a dress,
And all the world was an enchanted place.
And then methought outside a fast-locked gate
I mourned the loss of unrecorded words,
Forgotten tales and mysteries half said,
Wonders that might have been articulate,
And voiceless thoughts like murdered singing birds;
And so I woke and knew that he was dead.9


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