Title of Paper: Town/Country Identity Exposed as Farce in Oscar Wilde’s The Importance of Being Earnest
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Abstract:

Much has been made of the politics of performance in Oscar Wilde’s The Importance of Being Earnest as the play relates to issues of class and sexuality. However, there is an equally important performance of place that is being critiqued. Through dichotomous identification with names (Jack/Ernest, Algernon/Ernest) and place (town/country), Wilde not only problematizes the Victorian obsession with family name and status, but satirizes the English association of the “dirty” city with immoral behavior and the countryside with the private, feminine sphere where the British man can be made whole again and empire can be preserved. His ironic treatment of town and country overturns the false Victorian ideal that physically occupying a country home or relying on a Ruskin’s idealization of British womanhood could effectively overcome the taint of what Victorians viewed as “bad” behavior. Wilde thus uses comedy to undermine what he perceived as the absurd strictures placed on members of Victorian society.

Keywords: Oscar Wilde, The Importance of Being Earnest, town and country, Victorian society, countryside, rural space.

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On February 14, 1895, Oscar Wilde’s newest dramatic endeavor opened at St. James Theater in London to a packed house. Descriptions of the street scene before the theater opened that evening are reminiscent of the modern day Academy Awards red carpet spectacle. Wilde’s close friend, Ada Leverston, described the event as follows:

The street just outside was crowded, not only with the conveyances and the usual crowd of waiting people, but with other Wilde fanatics who appeared to regard the arrival as part of the performance. Many of these shouted and cheered the best-known people, and the loudest cheers were for the author who was as well known as the Bank of England, as he got out of his carriage with his pretty wife (267). The show was on and the play which Wilde describes in a letter to Charles Spurrier Mason as “quite nonsensical [with] no serious interest” (Hart-Davis 364) was and still is a huge success with most audiences. Some contemporary reviewers did object to the “nonsensical” aspects of the production, however. For example, George Bernard Shaw wrote, “I cannot say that I greatly cared for The Importance of Being Earnest. It amused me, of course; but unless comedy touches me as well as amuses me, it leaves me with a sense of having wasted my evening” (44). Patricia Behrendt suggests that Shaw’s response is a testimony to Wilde’s ability to “provoke hostility and discomfort” by inspiring both “appreciation and disdain simultaneously” (170). The reviewer for the New York Times is equally ambivalent, describing the play as “pure farce of Gilbertian parentage, but loaded with drolleries, epigrams, impertinences, and bubbling comicalities that only an Irishman could have ingrafted on that respectable Saxon stock” (Fyfe 44). Any invocation of Irish-ness in the late nineteenth century is necessarily tinged with disdain. The “respectable Saxon stock” that is so victimized according to this reviewer, nonetheless flocked in droves to the opening performance. Audiences who attended the play were mixed, consisting of “higher, middle, and lower classes” which congregated “in the nicely segregated stalls, boxes, dress circle, upper boxes, pit, and gallery of...[the] West End theatre” (Donohue and Berggren 27). The components of the play are equally segregated, not only in the split personalities of Jack and Algernon, but, more importantly by the setting itself. John Worthing’s repeated self-identification as “Ernest in town and Jack in the country” (463) produces a binary of person and place designed by Wilde as a parody of late Victorian town and country society. Although Jeremy Lalonde suggests “that The Importance of Being Earnest allows for two readings...[that] privilege the performance either of class or of sexuality” (659), I would propose a third reading: one that examines the play as a performance of place, specifically town and country, as an illusory function of Victorian identity.

In a review published following a 1908 production, St. John Hankin declared that The Importance of Being Earnest “is artistically the most serious work that Wilde produced for the theatre...With all its absurdity, its psychology is truer, its criticism of life subtler and more profound, than that of the other plays” (44-5). Hankin goes on to term the play “a psychological farce, a farce of ideas” (45). One of the ideas that Wilde caricatures is the Victorian attitude toward and expectation of
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national space. In The Production of Space, Henri Lefebvre describes social space in the following terms: “(Social) space is not a thing among other things, nor a product among other products: rather, it subsumes things produced, and encompasses their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity – their (relative) order and/or (relative) disorder. It is the outcome of a sequence and set of operations, and thus cannot be reduced to the rank of a simple object” (73). In A Theory of Place and Politics, John Agnew offers a similar definition for “place,” arguing that “concrete, everyday practices” make the concept of place more than an “object,” and create “a ‘structure of feeling’…or ‘felt sense of the quality of life at a particular place and time’” (27)\(^1\). Agnew goes on to explain that this particular concept of place “reinforces the social-spatial definition of place from the inside” and identifying with place this way “contributes yet another aspect to the meaning of place: one place or ‘territory’ in its differentiation from other places can become an ‘object’ of identity for a ‘subject’” (27-28 emphasis author’s). Agnew distills his argument by offering three major elements that together define his concept of place: “locale, the settings in which social relations are constituted; location, the geographical area encompassing the settings for social interaction as defined by social and economic processes operating at a wider scale; and sense of place, the local ‘structure of feeling’” (28 emphasis author’s). Therefore, “place” in these terms is synonymous with Lefebvre’s idea of “social space” and has a direct bearing on the identity inferred through social relations that occur within this space. Quite simply, place informs the identity of a subject or person who is in it as much as identity creates place. For example, a member of a higher socio-economic class generally adopts a parallel standard of living that reflects this class. Therefore, the wealthy create a particular place as a function of their socio-economic identity. On the other hand, the “locale” of the wealthy can be said to construct identity of the wealthy, imposing certain codes and expectations of behavior that are not imposed on persons of lower economic status. This is generally speaking, of course. There is also the stereotypical miser who lives in squalor with millions in the bank, but the fact that this individual is an aberration simply supports the theory that place determines identity and vice versa.

We see a deliberate construction of place designed to reinforce identity in Great Britain beginning in the seventeenth century. According to Donna Landry, the term “countryside” underwent a lexical shift beginning with the Game Act of 1671 at which time “‘countryside’ ceased to refer to a specific side – east or west, north or south – of a piece of country…and became ‘the countryside’, an imaginary, generalized space” designed to “connote not specific, local but aesthetic, global ‘natural unity’” (1). This re-signification did not happen in an instant but developed “as English society became more urban” (Landry 1). Urban areas provided the opposing side of the duality which is evidenced in William Booth’s “In Darkest England and the Way Out,” in which Booth likens the urban centers of England to “Darkest Africa” in this passage:

\(^1\) Agnew borrows the “structure of feeling” phrase from Raymond Williams’ Marxism and Literature (1977) where he argues that “human practices give rise to a set of expectations and meanings that in turn guide practice” (32). Williams also utilizes this concept in The Country and the City (1975).
The stony streets of London, if they could but speak, would tell of tragedies as awful, of ruin as complete, of ravishments as horrible, as if we were in Central Africa; only the ghastly devastation is covered, corpse-like, with the artificialities and hypocrisies of modern civilization (37).

It is by trudging onward, through the darkest part of Africa that the explorer reached “the light of the sun, the clear sky, and the rolling uplands of the grazing land” (38). So too, says Booth, can the morally bankrupt denizens of the cities escape because “Darker England is but a fractional part of ‘Greater England’” (39). The place or social space that is paralleled with the “rolling uplands of the grazing land” here is the English countryside which, according to Landry, was necessary as “a symbolic repository of all that was and is most cherished about being English” (Landry 1).

The countryside came to signify “every good thing” (Cobbett 7) in Victorian England. In 1830, William Cobbett, journalist and member of parliament, described the country as being stripped of its goods to supply “the Wen” leaving country people impoverished. This hapless country citizen was one representation of country life. The lucky owner of the country house was another. If one were fortunate enough to have the means, one could build a house in the “country” as an occasional refuge from the immoral influence of the city. It is this binary of country and city that characterizes the Victorian idea of place. The cities were polluted, overcrowded, with little or no green space and a large working class population. The cities were tainted by industry which, although fulfilling the Victorian need to be productive, also dirtied Victorian hands with money, not passed down through a gentle family heritage, but made from the labor of others. The country was “green” and represented a purer, more refined way to live out the ideal English life. Raymond Williams refers to this dualism as “the irresolvable choice between a necessary materialism and a necessary humanity” (293). In his work, The Country and the City, Williams describes the English country house as “one of the first forms of this temporary resolution” and discusses how remarkable it is that “so much of this settlement has been physically imitated, down to details of semi-detached villas and styles of leisure and weekends” (294). Williams insists that the “structure of feeling” associated with the country is based not only “on an idea of the happier past” but also on “the associated idea of innocence” (46). He contends that the “key to [the] analysis [of this structure of feeling] is the contrast of the country and the city and the court: here nature, there worldliness” (46). The term “nature” is infused with goodness and, as discussed previously, represents all that is good about England. The term “worldliness”, falls on the “necessary materialism” side of the “irresolvable choice” (Williams 293) and signifies all that is bad and unsavory, albeit necessary for the survival of England in the modern world. The country and the city as perceived by Victorian society are “places” as defined by Agnew in that they possess the three major elements of locale, location, and sense of place. They provide a venue for social relations, exist in specific geographical locations, and, as Williams argues, invoke a local “structure of feeling” (28). As places that can clearly be differentiated from each other, they are also theoretically “object[s] of identity” for their subjects or those that inhabit them at

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2 “Wen” or “tumor” is Cobbett’s name for London.

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any given point in time (Agnew 27-28). I say “theoretically” because the mid-Victorian binary of country and city was a false one. Clearly no place can assure the innocence of someone who visits or lives there just as no place can make someone immoral simply because he or she is exposed to it. The identities performed by the segment of Victorian society that enjoyed both a city and a country existence were artificially created to fit the place. Thus a captain of industry during the week who may find it necessary to oppress laborers in order to turn a profit can become the country gentlemen on the weekend, clearing the taint of his city activities with the green spaces and clean air of the countryside. This construct was necessary to preserve the illusion that industrialization did not interfere with the “greater England;” that the green spaces of the countryside were being properly preserved and cared for. The reality behind this image of an Edenic England is that the power gained by the control of the land, not preservation of the land or the morality of the people was the motivation for the countryside construct.

In Early Green Politics, Peter C. Gould traces the developing British attitude toward nature from the early eighteenth century notion that Nature was “separate from and...a servant of mankind” (3). More industrial late eighteenth century writers “exhorted the re-establishment of the physical and spiritual links that had once existed between Nature and society” (Gould 3). “Men close to Nature,” he explains, “were seen as repositories of moral virtue and a valuable culture” while it was believed that “the sense of social responsibility found in the country was absent in the metropolis” (4-5). This was followed by a call to somehow “integrate town and country” (Gould 6) by the mid-nineteenth century in an attempt to have the best of both worlds; the inventiveness and productivity of the town and the morally bracing greenness of the country. This movement gave way to the “Back to Nature” and “Back to the Land” campaigns of the late nineteenth century. Among other goals, these movements created “open spaces” within cities in an attempt to bring the countryside to the city space “as a positive force for elevating the morality of the people” (Gould 90). One of the reasons these green spaces were needed in the city was that the vast majority of city dwellers did not own land in the country to use as a retreat when the immoral influence of the city became too great. This is due in part to the urbanization of England that, according to Landry, was a “final consequence of the landlords’ victory in the long agricultural revolution” (7). In short, between the wealthy rural landlords and the government reclamation of land for “preservation”, there was no truly “country” land available for the lower class city worker. Therefore, the binary of city and country is not only one of identity as determined by place but is also intimately connected to wealth and power.

There is also a parallel between this notion of country as a moral base and the role of the upper class British female. In what was considered a progressive proposition at the time (1865), John Ruskin argued that it was the responsibility of the British female to take up her “queenly” duties and become the moral guide for British men. He calls on women to leave their gardens and answer the “call to queenly power, - not in their households merely, but over all within their sphere” (49). If women would respond and men would allow them to respond to this call, Ruskin declares that “the order and beauty induced by such benignant power would justify us in speaking of the territories over which each of them reigned, as ‘Queen’s Gardens’”
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(49). His proposal moves the sanctuary of home (private social space) outside of the garden gate to the public world. Like the country in the city/country binary, the British woman in Ruskin’s terms is expected to provide a moral grounding place for the British man who risks corruption in the work for money society. She is naturally imbued with “power to heal, to redeem, to guide, and to guard” (Ruskin 72). If women do not accept and wield this power responsibly, Ruskin warns, then “women are answerable” for the “war” and “injustice” that will occur when they fail to “hinder” men from immoral behavior (75).

It is this dichotomy of place as it relates to class, morality and gender that Wilde invokes in The Importance of Being Earnest. The drama may well be silly and nonsensical but it also completely disrupts, overturns and reveals as a sham the Victorian country/city construct of identity. That Wilde self-consciously constructed a setting designed to call attention to the town/country duality and how it affects identity performance is evidenced by John Worthing’s mantra, “my name is Ernest in town and Jack in the country” (463). This splitting of personalities in order to identify one with the urban space and one with the country is not limited to the Jack/Ernest character. Algernon, Gwendolyn, and Cecily are also deliberately associated with one space or the other. Like Jack/Ernest, Algernon assumes a different identity in the country, posing as Jack’s fictional younger brother, “Ernest” as a ploy to meet Cecily. What lends farcical weight to the play’s treatment of town/country is the denouement at the end of the play revealing that both Jack and Algernon are, in fact, “Ernest” in some sense. Jack’s name is actually “Ernest” and Algernon is actually Jack’s younger brother. In addition, Gwendolen and Cecily are pointedly identified with the city and the country respectively until it becomes necessary for them to band together as a force of Ruskin’s ideal of British womanhood. By creating these binary character combinations as functions of the town/country binary and then revealing the character binaries to be surface with no substance, Wilde demonstrates the absurd falseness of the Victorian perception of urban and rural existence.

First let us consider the complex split characters represented by Jack and Algernon. Both of these men are of the upper class, else they would not have the leisure time or the means to enjoy these alter egos. Algernon’s place in Victorian society is further evidenced by a titled aunt who visits him in his home on a regular basis, signaling his acceptance in her social arena. Jack did not inherit his place in society through blood but through the philanthropy of his foster father who found him as a baby, raised him as his heir, and appointed him guardian to his young granddaughter. The “country home” maintained by Jack is not a true country house in that it is not merely used as an escape from the city. Instead, it serves as his weekday residence. We are informed of this by the country rector, Dr. Chasuble, who lauds Jack as one who “usually likes to spend his Sunday in London” (489). Algernon, on the other hand, is the more typical Victorian gentleman whose responsibilities keep him in London during the week. That these responsibilities are limited to making sure his aunt has a sufficient number of men around her dinner table and arranging music for her receptions makes Algernon a parody of the supposed industrious and productive city man who deserves a break at the country home. It is significant that Algernon is expected to dance attendance on his Aunt in London even on a Saturday,
indicating that he is expected to spend his weekends in town to fulfill his familial obligations. If both of these men’s alternative identities were constructed so that they misbehaved in town and appeared virtuous in the country, Wilde would simply be confirming the town/country binary the Victorians enjoyed. This is not the case, however. Their “real” and assumed identities form binaries that correspond with town/country, but they are complexly and diametrically opposed to Victorian societal expectations. They both assume their “Ernest” identities in an attempt to misbehave without consequences. Jack is “Ernest” in town while Algernon is “Ernest” in the country, therefore, the Algernon/Ernest duality does not fit the paradigm. For appearances sake, Algernon behaves as expected as the nephew of Lady Bracknell in the city. It is in the guise of visiting his sick friend Bunbury in the country that Algernon is free to misbehave. According to Miss Prism, at least, Jack possesses a high “sense of duty and responsibility” in the country. He confesses to Algernon, however, his true feelings about country versus city life in these lines: “When one is in town, one amuses oneself. When one is in the country one amuses other people. It is excessively boring” (489). In this way, Jack also subverts the bad city/good country paradigm. He openly admits to enjoying being “bad” over being “good”, indicating that his town self is his true self. Wilde furthers the irony by calling Jack “Ernest” in town. This wordplay contributes to overturning the paradigm. One would expect a Victorian gentleman to above all else be earnest in the country. Instead, Jack invests all of his misbehavior in his supposedly “earnest” alter ego. On the surface, therefore, the Ernest (town)/Jack (country) arrangement meets the traditional bad city/good country construct. Through wordplay, however, Wilde subtly undermines this construct. One cannot be called “Ernest” and be irresponsible. Wilde makes sure his audience understands the irony of Jack’s city name when he creates female characters who will only marry an “earnest” man.

This brings us to the Gwendolen/Cecily binary opposition. The women are initially identified with their particular locale by their conversation. Gwendolen reveals her polished urban-ness by her reference to expensive monthly magazines and metaphysical speculations. She is also quick to point out that she knows that news of “the age of ideals…has reached the provincial pulpits” (471) only because she has been told of this occurrence, not through firsthand experience. Her town associated worldliness is further evidenced when she condescendingly points out Jack’s country-associated inexperience in making marriage proposals. She compares him to her town dwelling brother, Gerald who “often propose[s] for practice” (473). She follows this statement by expressing the desire that Jack “always look at [her]…especially when there are other people present” (474). In this way she is acting like other London women who were earlier denounced by Algernon for “flirt[ing] with their own husbands” (466) in public. Further confirmation of Gwendolen’s identification with expected town behavior is her reaction when her mother denies her permission to marry Jack/Ernest. She tells the supposed love of her life of this disappointment, adding that “though [she] may marry someone else, and marry often, nothing that [her mother] can possibly do can alter [her] eternal devotion to [him]” (483). It is significant that she follows this declaration of her intent to marry someone else in spite of her undying love for him with a confession that his “simplicity of character makes [him] exquisitely incomprehensible” (483). She then asks him for his country
address. Thus Jack’s “Ernest in town” alter ego is the country man with whom city
girl Gwendolen is obsessed.

Algernon/Ernest has the same hold over Cecily but for different reasons. As a
reader not of expensive magazines but of sensational novels, Cecily is fascinated by
fallen men who need rehabilitating. She is not interested in studying German, much
less discussing metaphysical speculations. She is interested in watering flowers and
dreaming of reforming her Uncle Jack’s miscreant brother, Ernest. In this way, she
attempts to assume the role Ruskin assigns to British women. When she meets
Algernon who is passing himself as Jack’s younger brother, Ernest, they discuss his
bad behavior. Algernon/Ernest confesses to her that he is not good enough for this
world and expresses his desire that she reform him, suggesting that she “might make
that [her] mission” (492). She fails to support the moral fortitude of British manhood
by initially turning him down, replying, “I’m afraid I’ve no time, this afternoon”
(492) but admits she has no objections to him reforming himself although she believes
his attempt to do so would be “Quixotic” (492). She seems to be as fascinated by his
supposed wickedness as Gwendolen is by Jack’s “simplicity of character” (483). She
later confesses that her attraction to him is due in part to Jack’s description of his
“wicked younger brother” (504). Similar to the Gwendolen/Jack construct, the
country girl Cecily is fascinated by her diametrically opposed counterpart, the worldly
urban man, Algernon/Ernest.

The most stereotypical town/country descriptions of these women are offered
by their male relatives. For example, Jack first describes Cecily as “a sweet, simple,
innocent girl” (518) while Algernon tells Jack that Gwendolen is “a brilliant, clever,
thoroughly experienced young lady” (518). In this way, the men are supporting the
town/country – experience/innocence binary opposition as they attempt to prevent
each other from marrying these women. The inference is that a country Jack would
not suit the experienced Gwendolen nor would an experienced Algernon be suitable
for a country Cecily. The town girl/country girl binary is ultimately revealed as false
in the desire that both women have to marry a man named “Ernest.” Gwendolen
rationalizes her motivation for marrying only an “Ernest” as a result of living in “an
age of ideals” (471). She confesses to Jack/Ernest that her “ideal has always been to
love someone of the name Ernest” (471). She goes on to describe this name as one
“that inspires absolute confidence” (471). Her falling in love with him is based solely
on his name and occurred even before they met. Cecily responds to Algernon’s
proposal in a similar way. When he proposes to her within minutes of meeting her,
she replies, “You must not laugh at me, darling, but it had always been a childish
dream of mine to love someone whose name was Ernest” (506). As a direct echo of
Gwendolen’s words in the first Act, Cecily declares, “there is something in that name
that seems to inspire absolute confidence” (506). The Gwendolen/Cecily binary is
presented as a true reflection of the town/country duality but these two women
ultimately desire the same name if not the same man. Their twin desires to marry
someone named “Ernest” puts Jack and Algernon in quite a fix. Neither of them are
Ernest. Indeed, at this point in the narrative, there is no Ernest and no earnestness
either. They each seek to remedy their lack of the proper name by seeking out the
country parson to be christened “Ernest,” thus legitimizing both of their alternate
identities and their claim to the virtue of “earnestness.” It is significant that this
The Victorian legitimization must take place in the country, reinforcing Ruskin’s vision of the country as a place of rehabilitation for the English man even as this vision is satirized as these men believe merely assuming the name of “Ernest” will transform them into earnest men worthy of the women who love them.

In Act II the absurdity of the Jack/Ernest and Algernon/Ernest farce escalates when Gwendolen arrives at Jack’s country manor house and meets Cecily. The women soon realize that they are both engaged to marry an Ernest Worthing. A rather catty exchange follows with Gwendolen making derogatory comments about the country and Cecily responding in kind with comments about the city. When Jack and Algernon arrive and it becomes apparent that neither of them is named Ernest, the stage direction calls for the two girls to “move together and put their arms round each other’s waists as if for protection” (516). The binary of place that has dictated their identity and behavior throughout the play collapses and they become as one person. When faced with a Gwendolen/Cecily united, Jack is moved to confess his subterfuge: “Gwendolen – Cecily – it is very painful for me to be forced to speak the truth. It is the first time in my life that I have ever been reduced to such a painful position, and I am really quite inexperienced in doing so” (517). By joining as one force of British womanhood no longer separated or constrained by the city/country expectations of behavior, Gwendolen/Cecily embody the Ruskin ideal moving Jack to confess his subterfuge. Jack’s avowed inexperience here is not the kind that resides in opposition to worldliness. Rather it reflects an inherent dishonesty that is at odds with his country existence; further evidence that Wilde’s primary intention is to reveal the association of innocence with the country as completely contrived.

Act III opens with a reconciliation of sorts between Gwendolen/Cecily and Jack/Algernon. The women decide to forgive the men for their deception, believing their assurances that they only perpetuated the deception so that they could spend time with them. This motivation is, of course, completely false. They constructed alter egos to get out of the responsibilities associated with their home locale and enjoy the pleasures offered by the alternate social space. The deception was necessary, of course, to preserve the boundaries between town and country identities. Wilde is suggesting and then satirizing the idea that Victorian men cannot frequent both places and maintain one identity. It is significant that even as they forgive the men for deceiving them that Gwendolen/Cecily continue to channel Ruskin and make a pronouncement in one voice, declaring that the Christian names, Jack and Algernon, “are still an insuperable barrier” (524). In other words, they must become “Ernest” to truly demonstrate “earnestness” or moral fiber. We see the binary that defines the two men break down as they clasp hands and reply in one voice, “Our Christian names! Is that all? But we are going to be christened this afternoon” (524). There is no longer a town/country identity construct. There is no more talk of “Ernest in town and Jack in the country” or of Bunburying. There is no longer a need for a country moral base since British womanhood is providing that base. The two men are willing to be Ernest all of the time in order to secure the love of Gwendolen and Cecily.

Ultimately, it is Lady Bracknell who once and for all reveals the town/country binary of place to be completely irrelevant. Lalonde describes Lady Bracknell’s role in the play as “a figure of the larger society’s work to fit individual subjects into socially recognized and sanctioned categories” (662). He argues that “through the
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figure of Lady Bracknell, Wilde demonstrates how the subject is socially constituted, while allowing for individual acts of resistance against totalizing selfhood” (663). These acts of resistance include Algernon’s escape to go Bunburying and Gwendolen’s escape to see Jack/Ernest. Both of these are characterized as escapes not only from Lady Bracknell but also from the place-constructed identities they must maintain in her presence. It is Lady Bracknell, however, who arrives on the scene in time to save Jack and Algernon from submitting to the “childish” performance of a christening. She reduces the entire ridiculous situation to a matter of class and money. Since Cecily is endowed with a fortune, she has no objection to her nephew marrying this country girl as long as she changes her hairstyle and raises her chin. When she discovers that Jack’s origins were not actually in a “terminus” but that he is in fact Algernon’s older brother and entitled to the same social status, she has no objection to his marrying her daughter. Since Jack was christened as a baby with his father’s name, Ernest, he is saved from being christened again. Algernon’s name problem is also solved because, as Christopher Nassar argues, “Algy is [Jack’s] younger brother, known to Cecily as Ernest” (134). Fortunately for them, the result of the revelation of the two Ernests’ town/country deceptions “is not ostracism but marriage…reducing [the] situation to the level of farce and turning the unmasking into a happy event” (Nassar 137).

Jack/Ernest sums up Wilde’s exposure of the town/country binary as false with these words: “I always told you, Gwendolen, my name was Ernest, didn’t I? Well, it is naturally Ernest” (540). All “drolleries, epigrams, and impertinences” aside, ending the play with a “natural” Ernest encapsulates Wilde’s criticism of mid-Victorian sensibilities. Jack is and has always been Ernest regardless of his location or his behavior. Thus, Wilde overturns the false Victorian ideal that the idealized rural space or British womanhood can serve as a moral base for immoral British men. Indeed, the play leaves the audience with a sense that the “bad” behavior of Jack and Algernon is no more than a natural response to Victorian strictures on society. Joel Fineman argues that “the intention of [Wilde’s] farce is to resolve the paradox of autology and heterology by enacting it through to its absurd reduction, to the point, that is, where Ernest becomes, literally becomes, his name” (83). Through nonsense and trivial conversations between players, Wilde challenges late-Victorian society to dispense with the absurd posturing necessary to create the “symbolic repository of all that was and is most cherished about being English” (Landry 1), particularly as what was most cherished in the nineteenth century was fast disappearing under the modern onslaught of globalizing industrialization. Wilde sees no need for the preservation of Victorian sensibilities or the creation of an imaginary place or imaginary person to come to terms with what, to him, was natural human behavior.
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