

Oscar Wilde and Joe Orton Similarities and Differences

As Seen in the Plays

The Importance of Being Earnest and

What the Butler Saw

*An interactive, “gameshow” paper**

by Lori Shyba (2002)

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Cast: The Gameshow Avatar • The Literary Text


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Memorandum:
This term paper has two versions, the reading version and the performing version. The magenta type indicates “optional material” for the gameshow version.

The Gameshow avatar is an undisguised convention of this term paper. She takes whatever license with dramatic convention is convenient to her purpose.

(Legend on Screen: “Où est la vérité”)

Gameshow avatar: I need a cigarette and here I am in a hallway with doors on each side. I need a cigarette and there are actors behind those doors. Knowing that actors are smokers I propel myself into the studio behind the door on the left in time to hear:

(Young man) Jack: *(rushing over to mid-aged woman)* Is this the handbag, Miss Prism?

(Mid-aged woman) Miss Prism: *(calmly)* It seems to be mine. Yes, here is the injury it received through the upsetting of a Gower Street omnibus in younger and happier days.... And here, on the lock, are my initials. ... I am delighted to have it so unexpectedly restored to me. It has been a great inconvenience being without it all these years.

(Young man) Jack: *(in a pathetic voice)* Miss Prism, more is restored to you than this handbag. I was the baby you placed in it.

(Mid-aged woman) Miss Prism: *(amazed)* You?

(Young man) Jack: *(embracing her)* Yes ... Mother! ¹

These actors are deeply connected to “the moment” so I leave the room, cross the hall and hurl myself into the other studio behind the door on the right. I hear:

(Young woman) Geraldine: ... *(Tearfully to Dr. Prentice)* and I wish to report the loss of my lucky elephant charm.

(White-coated doctor) Dr. Rance: *(Takes a brooch from his pocket.)* Is this the piece of jewelry to which you refer? ...

(Young woman) Geraldine: Yes it has great sentimental value.

(Young man) Nick: Look. I’ve got one like that.

(Middle-aged woman) Mrs. Prentice: A single brooch can be made of these two fragments. Oh my heart is beating like a wild thing.

(Young woman and young man together): It’s true.

(Policeman) Sgt. Match: ... How did you know it was a single piece?

(Mid-aged woman) Mrs. Prentice: It belonged to me once. Many years ago, when I was a young woman, I was raped in a linen closet on the second floor of the Station Hotel. As the man left me he pressed that brooch into my hands in part payment.

(Policeman) Sgt. Match: ... How did these children come to be in possession of the separate halves?

(Middle-aged woman) Mrs. Prentice: I paid for my misdemeanor by conceiving twins ... I decided to abandon them to their fate. I broke the brooch in half and pinned a separate piece to each babe. *(Hugging the young woman and young man).* Oh children. I am your mother. ²

Puzzled, I leave the room, stand in the middle of the hall and muse that this must be a scriptwriting project where two different endings to the same play



are being workshopped. Behind the door on the left are actors inventing and stealing each other's identities and then being reunited with their mother and the same theme is being explored behind the door on the right. Different words, same situation. The same rat-tat-tat breakneck comedy, freeform wit, puns flying galore, ribald sexual in-jokes, hilarious physical sight gags and shameless cultural parody.

Suddenly both groups of actors simultaneously burst from the studios on smoke breaks and I feel I am inching closer to both the truth and my nicotine fix. I run after them to the nearest exit, salivating at the sound of their cigarette packages squelching frenzied crumples and I uncover the secret. Behind door number one was a scene from Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* and behind door number two was a scene from Joe Orton's *What the Butler Saw*.

So much the same. What's the story behind that? After I bum a smoke from the governess, Miss Prism and a light from the white coated doctor, Dr. Rance, I head to the library to find out more. I think the rest of the paper will explain itself...

Backgrounds of Oscar Wilde and Joe Orton

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde was born on the 16th of October, 1854, in Dublin, Ireland and died on the 30th of November, 1900, in Paris at the age of 47. His mother was the poet Lady Jane Francesca Wilde who, writing under the name of Speranza, electrified Ireland with her passionate tirades in verse and prose against the English. "Lady Wilde, whose 'talk was like fireworks — brilliant, whimsical and flashy', held salons to which the literary world came and over which she presided with panache." ³

Imagine young Oscar surprising his poet mother at her elegant writing desk in their aristocratic home. She turns to him and reads aloud, providing him with formative influences in a literary style that shows up later in Oscar's work:

“... (the Leprechauns) know all the secrets of hidden treasure, and if they take a fancy to a person will guide him to the spot in the fairy rath where the pot of gold lies buried. It is believed that a family now living near Castlerea came by their riches in a strange way...” ⁴

Oscar Wilde is best known as an Irish dramatist, poet, novelist, writer of fairy tales, and convicted criminal. He was probably also the most famous homosexual ever.

...

John Kingsley Orton was born on the 1st of January, 1933 in Leicester, England and died on the 9th of August, 1967 in London at 34 years of age. His was a bickering working class family that valued neither affection nor emotion. "I'm from the gutter," is the way Orton referred to his upbringing, going on to say, "And don't you ever forget it because I won't." ⁵



Largely self-educated (he failed at school but avidly pursued reading and classical music), the adolescent Orton was drawn to the fantasies and possibilities of theatre, and developed an ambition to act. Orton's mother, like Oscar Wilde's, may also have provided him with some formative influences. According to John Lahr, Joe Orton's best-known biographer, she fancied herself to be a singer and her children never brought dates home to meet the family because she could be trusted not to break into drunken song. *It's was only a Shanty in Old Shanty Town* was among the highlights of her repertoire.⁶ To her credit, she bought John, whom she favoured as her most gifted child, a piano and apparently the only song he could bang out on the key was, *Don't Fence Me In*.⁷ (Lahr 1978, 51)

It's 1940 and most homes in England had a wireless radio. In the wake of the evacuation of hundreds of thousands of fighting men at Dunkirk, Prime Minister Winston Churchill — a man whose penis shows up prominently in Orton's later work, as we will see, may have been heard on the Orton household radio as he rallied the British citizenry:

“... we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.”⁷

Joe Orton (as he came to be known) is best known as a dramatist, convicted criminal and for his horrible, violent death by bludgeoning by his homosexual lover. He is also well known as “The Oscar Wilde of the welfare state gentility.”⁸

...

Gameshow avatar: Upon reading this statement, the idea of writing a comparison of Oscar Wilde and Joe Orton began to play a more important role in my life. Three weeks later I was surrounded by books and dissertations with sticky notes poking out like little pink, yellow and green tongues wagging “mention me, mention me, mention me.” “I have definite proof that both men were exorcising dark fantasies in their dramatic works,” flaps a yellow one. “I'll bet twenty bucks that that for Orton, Wildean subversion continued to be liberating but his subversion exposed the realities disguised by artifice,” flaps another yellow one. A pink sticky boldly delared, “The attack is a gay attack on virile nationalism.”

Calm down, calm down and talk among yourselves!” I beg of all the pink and yellow sticky note chatterboxes. “I have some of my own ideas to explore first but I promise to get back to you soon enough.” I turn my attention to the matter of the green stickies who wag information about Wilde's London of 1890 and Orton's London of 1960, the type of stickies that feature diary snippets, fragments of letters, naughty, ribald and murderous history.

...



(Image montage on screen: *The Savoy Hotel and Queen Victoria.*
Caption: “Le fin du siècle”)

Their Times

Oscar Wilde’s London of the late 19th Century

In 1879, at the age of 25, the flamboyant Oscar Wilde decided to make himself famous and set off from his university town of Oxford to London. By all accounts, he insinuated himself into the class he labeled as “the beautiful people.” He dressed outrageously, exercised his natural wit, passed himself off as an art critic and shamelessly pandered to the affection of journalists, theatrical impresarios and celebrities like the actress Ellen Terry to whom he wrote in 1879:

“Dear Miss Ellen Terry, Will you accept from me a poem which I have written to you ... as small proof of my great and loyal admiration for your splendid artistic powers, and the noble tenderness and pathos of your acting.”⁹

Also in the late 1880s, The Mysterious Monster of London’s East End struck! The Whitechapel area of East London played witness to a series of horrific murders, which remain to this day unsolved. The unknown assailant, referred to as “Jack the Ripper”, stalked the dimly lit, fog-blanketed streets of the East End of London with a single, brutal ambition ... Murder Most Horrid.

As the century wore on into le fin de siècle, other London current events included, in theatre; Caryl’s *The Sentry* playing at the Lyric and *Tra-la-la Tosca Burlesque* at the Royalty, in art; the English arts and crafts movement evolved into art nouveau with artists such as Aubrey Beardsley. Other world events included, in moving pictures, Eadweard Muybridge’s Zoopraxiscope and the publication of *Animal Locomotion*; in architecture the construction of the Eiffel Tower for the Paris World Fair and in music, wax cylinder recordings emerged with catchy popular tunes such as *The Esquimaux Dance* by William Tuson, featuring a Clarinet solo with barking dogs.

It was in this age and time that Oscar Wilde wrote *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), *Salomé* (1891), *Lady Windermere’s Fan* (1893), *An Ideal Husband* (1893), and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1894).

•••

(Image on screen: *Station Hotel and Queen Elizabeth*
Text: *Le milieu du siècle à venir*)

Joe Orton’s London of the mid 20th Century

In 1951, at the age of 18, very ordinary and unsophisticated John Orton stripped himself of his working class accent and left Leicester for the excitement of London’s RADA (The Royal Academy of Dramatic Art). He



was thin and always cold, wheezed with asthma but loved to read books he stole from the Bishop Street Public Library. Orton's sister Marilyn recalls his reading her Greek mythology and Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Marilyn remembers him "looking up from the play with an eyebrow arched in mock astonishment to exclaim in a fluting voice: 'A handbag.'"¹⁰

A few weeks after he started at RADA, in a letter to fellow student Joyce Holmes, he bubbled about his acting class:

"... we were doing a queer class called movement which consists of flopping about in the most obscure positions. The obscure positions ... so damaged the bone structure of the class that six of them are in hospital having their necks re-twisted and I have my left leg permanently around my right ear. On Mondays we have a sort of gym class. The teacher shows his legs and wears body makeup, he also makes obscene suggestions in a polite way." (Lahr 1978, 76)

At about this same time, Orton notes in his diary over a period of a five weeks starting in May 1951:

"...An actor's life for me.... Digs in Gower Street. What fun.... Someone in the other class keeps looking at me.... Mr. Constable's special movement class. Was eyed.... Met Ken and John at Charing Cross Road. Don't quite understand Ken.... Am beginning to understand Ken.... Well! ... Met Ken. He invites us to live with him.... Move into Ken's flat.... Well! ... Well!... Well!... Well!... (Lahr 1978, 77-78)

Indeed. Well! Well! Well! Ken. On August 1, 1967, The malicious, co-dependent, Monster of London's West End struck! The Islington area of North London played witness to a horrific murder. The victim, Joe Orton, stalked dimly lit toilets, and dark doorways of London with a single ambition ... Anonymous Homosexual Sex. The assailant, Kenneth Halliwell, his companion of 15 years bludgeoned him to death with a hammer ... Murder Most Horrid!

London was "Groovy, Baby" in the 1960s. In theatre, *Hair* was at the Shaftsbury and *Cabaret* at the Strand, Twiggy was the fab face and Mary Quant made the mini skirt the decade's defining fashion statement. The Beatles movie *Help!* premiered at the cinema and, in music, Procol Harum sang *Whiter Shade of Pale*. Elsewhere in the world, Bob Fosse's *Sweet Charity* played Broadway, Andy Warhol made art out of soup cans, Eldridge Cleaver mobilized the Black Panther movement, and queers from all around the globe continued Oscar Wilde's tradition of debauched vacationing in North Africa.

It was in this age and time that Joe Orton wrote *Entertaining Mr. Sloane* (1963), *The Ruffian on the Stair* (1963), *Loot* (1964), *Crimes of Passion* (1967), *Funeral Games* (1966), and *What the Butler Saw* (1967).

...



(Image montage on screen: Multicoloured Spreadsheet Matrix.
Caption: “Mise-en-scene”)

Gameshow avatar: Frankly, I don't know what I'm going to find out from the elaborate French Scene Matrix I'm building. My computer software has tricks up its sleeve and there will be truths disclosed. What they'll be is all a matter of speculation. Time will be rendered into small cells tracing, perhaps character population dynamics or recurring themes and symbols, allowing comparisons to be made between the two plays. What will be the result? Will this spreadsheet analysis be the expected something that this term paper relies on?

...

Their Plays — *Earnest and Butler*

In advance of disclosing discoveries stemming from the French scene analysis, a brief history of both plays is useful.

In 1894 after completion of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Oscar Wilde wrote to George Alexander, the manager of the St. James' Theatre:

“The real charm of the play, if it is to have a charm, must be in the dialogue. The plot is slight but, I think, adequate.... Well, I think it's an amusing thing with lots of fun and it might be made. If you think so too, ... do let me know, and send me £150 pounds. If when the play is finished, you think it too slight — not serious enough — you can have the £150 back.”¹²

Earnest is, in fact, a comedy of manners about Jack Worthing and Algernon Moncrieff. Both young men have taken to bending the truth in order to add a dash of excitement to their lives. Jack has invented an imaginary brother, Ernest, whom he uses as an excuse to escape from his dull home in the country and frolic in town. Algernon uses a similar technique, only in reverse: His imaginary friend, Bunbury, provides a convenient and frequent method of taking adventures in the country. However, their deceptions eventually cross paths, resulting in a series of crises of mistaken identity that threaten to spoil their romantic pursuits: Jack of his love for Gwendolen Fairfax, and Algernon for Cecily Cardew. It's the unraveling of the mystery of ancestry and reunification with birth families which playfully spirals the play toward its romantic resolve.

In 1967, in his diary of April 17, Joe Orton recalls showing the completed manuscript of *What the Butler Saw* to his agent Peggy Ramsay:

“I simply had hysterics. It's the best thing you've done so far ... the Lord Chamberlain isn't going to allow you to show Churchill's prick on the stage... And the other thing is the incest. I simply don't know whether all that fucking of parents and children will be allowed.”¹³

Like *Earnest*, *What the Butler Saw* pokes fun at sex, authority, and family relationships. This black farce is a tale of a sex-obsessed psychiatrist (Dr.



Prentice), who attempts to seduce a prospective secretary (Geraldine Barclay) but is frustrated by the arrival of Prentice's nymphomaniac wife, an over-enthusiastic hospital inspector (Dr. Rance), an over-sexed bellboy (Nick), and a dim-witted policeman (Sgt. Match). Deceptions eventually cross paths and the clinic becomes a bedlam of mistaken identity, undressing and cross dressing, dropped trousers and untimely entrances and exits. Just as in *Earnest*, it's the unraveling of the mystery of family heritage and reunification with birth families which propels the play toward a spirited resolve.

...

Gameshow avatar: Joe Orton once declared that one of his ambitions was to "Write a play as good as the Importance of Being Earnest." Was he deliberately setting out to Out Wilde Wilde? These big colourful charts are like a superdog race — how many hoops can the characters jump through and how fast. They're also like a digital audio score — squint at *Earnest* and it sings a song of legato sophistication interspersed with pizzicato frivolity. Look at *Butler* and it's like a hysterical *Oingo Boingo* filmscore for a Tim Burton movie or the intro to *The Simpsons*.

...

Discoveries based on "French Scene" Time/Action Flow Chart Matrixes ONLINE VERSION, SEE SEPARATE FILE "ORTON&WILDE.XLS"

My overall aim in breaking *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *What the Butler Saw* into dramatic units known as French scenes is to make an informed appraisal of the two plays based on a graph which allows quick points of comparison regarding the plays' structure and pacing of action. The time/action matrix also provides a visual perspective on appearances of plot devices and occasions of puns and sight gags. By looking at select thematic reoccurrences, patterns also emerge which address such subjects as central truths, root vices, and social/subversive commentary – all subjects which are extensively explored by a variety of Wilde and Orton critics and scholars.¹⁴

Genre and Comic Action and Dramatic Structure

Referring to the charts on pages 8, 9 and 10 the most impactful discovery is the variation in number of French scenes contained in the plays, both of which have approximately the same running time. Based on characters' entrances and exits, *Earnest* has 38 units over about a two-hour timeframe averaging out to a little over three minutes per scene. In contrast, *Butler* has 96 scenes averaging out to a little over a minute each. Taking into consideration, as well, the matrix line item "Sight Gags," (in combination with the obviously break-neck speed of entrances and exits), we can conclude that *Butler*, with five instances of clearly defined non-verbal sight-gags is a very physical, as well as fast-paced comedy. This agrees well with the hypothesis that the play is a "black farce," which can be described as "a subversive work of satire in which highly improbable plot situations, exaggerated characters, and often slapstick elements are used for humorous effect."¹⁴



In *Earnest*, the only instance of a sight gag might be the “muffin-eating orgy” scene at the end of act two but, because it is accompanied by elaborate verbal discussion, it is not really a “non-verbal” sight gag. The apparent lack of flamboyant physical action can be attributed to the fact that *Earnest* is a “comedy of manners” which can be described as “a comedy satirizing the attitudes and behavior of a particular social group, often of fashionable society.”(American Heritage online)

In terms of dramatic structure and “the well-made play,” *Earnest*, according to the chart, easily follows the conventional pattern of exposition, rising action, crisis, and climax, with an act-three denouement offering a resolution and clarification to the preceding sequence of events. In contrast, *Butler* moves its audience through the pattern of exposition, rising action, crisis, but the climax goes on and on until the very end of the play. In fact the final-scene emergence of the erect phallus of Winston Churchill punctuates the effect of the long and exciting climax.

...

Gameshow avatar: Shouldn't that have been my line? The erect phallus and exciting climax? This term paper is getting very bold on its own and alas, I am becoming redundant! But my most wonderful trick of all is the magic of the scoresheet.

Scoresheet:

Sightgags: Wilde: .5 Orton: 5

...

Characterization and Plot Drivers

Working our way down the vertical axis of the chart, the next point of discussion stems from a scan of the characters (vertically) and the frequency of appearances on stage (horizontal). The most obvious similarity, on a vertical scan, is that there are almost exactly as many characters, six in *Butler* and seven in *Earnest* (plus obligatory servants in the case of *Earnest*) and, on a horizontal scan, that a good deal of the time spent on stage is by an actor playing somebody else. In *Butler*, Geraldine is plays Nick in drag, and Nick plays first Geraldine in drag and then plays Sgt. Match — providing, of course, additional sight gags. In *Earnest*, both Algy and Jack play Ernest — always, as the chart proves, in the presence of Cecily, Gwendolyn, and Lady Bracknell. In fact it is the appearance of both characters acting the roles of Ernest that propel the play from its crisis to the point of climax.

Susan Rusinko, author of *Joe Orton*,¹⁶ was my inspiration in choosing spreadsheet cell colours for the various characters. Rusinko postulates that “Wilde’s influence is seen in the big revelatory scene as Orton parades characters and actions from ... *Earnest*. He transforms Wildes Canon Chasuble into Dr. Prentice, Miss Prism into Mrs. Prentice, Algernon and Jack into Nick and Geraldine, and the identifying handbag into a similarly functioning brooch.”



Gameshow avatar: If Orton can attempt to out Wilde Wilde, why can't I Out-Susan Susan? What about the role of the penis?

...

Rusinko's comparison of the handbag and the brooch brings up the importance of both the handbag and the Churchill phallus as pivotal visual plot devices. The importance of both objects was significant enough to allow line items for both, just under the character list, and it's interesting to note in the case of *Butler* that the phallus, onstage in a box until the final scene of the play, can almost be thought of as the seventh character. Finding it (him) is, in fact, the primary objective of Sgt. Match and forms one of the many sub-plots of *Butler*. In the case of the handbag, even though it is not positioned onstage throughout the entire play, continual reference to it makes it a "top-of-mind" object of dramatic value.

Earnest has a single plotline which drives character motivation — gaining approval for marriage — which provides a relatively smooth appearance of progress on the character graph. *Butler's* characters, however, have a wide range of motivations and objectives which helps to explain the herky jerky, higgly piggly appearance of the graph. Dr. Prentice's simple objective of hiring a secretary and Geraldine's simple objective of getting hired by the doctor is hijacked by Mrs. Prentice's desire to dodge Nick's blackmail scheme and Dr. Rance's goal to use the play's other characters as case studies for the definitive "money making potboiler" about madness, buggery, outrageous women, strange love-cults, transvestism, fetishes, bisexuality, murder and, as an added bonus, necrophilia and double incest.

Another plot driver is the "Earnestness" of *Earnest* and "Madness" of *Butler*. According to the chart, a third of the scenes in *Earnest* have direct mention, in one way or another, to the importance of being "Ernest" and a quarter to a third of the scenes of *Butler* have direction mention of "Madness" — almost always coinciding with Dr. Rance and/or Mrs. Prentice's stage time. In the essay *Forms of Freedom and Mystery*, Katherine Worth writes about the correspondence between "earnestness" in Wilde's play and "madness" in Orton's play. She calls both "the root vice of the play; all the other ills are branching out from it, above all the determination to categorize and label and pin people down that afflicts characters in this play as it does, though in so much more mild and decorous forms, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*."16

...

Scoresheet:

Simultaneous Plotlines:	Wilde: 1	Orton: 5
Maintaining plot device top of mind value:		
Wilde:	5 (handbag)	Orton: 5 (penis)
Running tally:	Wilde: 6.5	Orton 15



Puns and Witticisms

Both Oscar Wilde and Joe Orton excelled in the use of witty language and satirical, sometimes subversive punnery. Within the 38 French scenes in *Earnest*, the column entitled “Quotable Quotes” yielded 54 stand-alone puns and witticisms, or almost a pun a minute in a two-hour show. These are all recorded on the spreadsheet — some of the more memorable, many of which underline this play as a comedy of manners and express the snobbery of the English upper classes, include:

“If the lower orders don't set us a good example, what on earth's the use of them really?”

“When one is in town one amuses oneself. When one is in the country one amuse other people.”

“Whenever people talk to me about the weather, I always feel quite certain that they mean something else.”

“Do you smoke? I'm glad to hear it. A man should have an occupation of some kind.”

“The only way to behave to a woman is to make love to her, if she is pretty, and to someone else if she is plain.”

“If I am occasionally a little overdressed, I make up for it by being always immensely over-educated.”

“It is very vulgar to talk about one's business. Only people like stock-brokers do that, and then merely at dinner parties.”

“Never speak disrespectably of society. Only those that can't get into it do that.”

Within the 96 French scenes of *Butler*, there are 41 hilarious lines, or about a laugh every minute and a half. Not all of them are “Quotable Quotes” but to make up for it, there are themed one-liners, “Take off your clothes,” or “drop your trousers — eleven occasions, always accompanied by a sight gag. Among the most memorable — most of which underline the play's subversion through sexual perversion, include:

“Lie on the couch with your hands behind your back and think of the closing chapters of your favourite work of fiction. (A parody of the expression “Lie Back and think of England.”)”

“You were born with your legs apart. They'll bury you in a Y-shaped coffin.”

“Have you taken up transvestism? I'd no idea our marriage teetered on the edge of fashion.”

“Mrs. Prentice is harder to get into than the reading room at the British Museum.”

“We've no privileged class here. We practice democratic lunacy here.”

“The sane appear as strange to the mad as the mad to the sane.”

“Women wear dresses, not men, I won't be a party to the wanton destruction of a fine old tradition.”



John Lahr aptly observed that “Joe Orton... did something special with the English language. His dialogue ... assimilated advertising jargon, the shrill overstatement of tabloid journalism, the stilted lusciousness of B movies and fused them into his own illuminating epigrammatic style.”¹⁷

...

Scoresheet:

Witticisms and Puns: Wilde: 54 Orton: 41

Running tally: Wilde: 60.5 Orton 56

It's a close race!

Treatment of Sexuality and In-Jokes

It's difficult to analyze the role of sexuality and sexual innuendo in these plays without a short synopsis of Censorship in the Theatre:

The 1737 Licensing Act

Part III

And be it further enacted by the authority aforesaid, that from and after the said twenty-fourth day of June, one thousand, seven hundred and thirty seven, no person shall for hire, gain or reward, act perform, represent, or cause to be acted, performed or represented any new interlude, tragedy, comedy, opera, play, farce, or other entertainment of the stage, or any part of parts therein; or any new act, scene or other part added to any old interlude, tragedy, comedy, opera, play, farce or other entertainment of the stage, or any new prologue or epilogue, unless a true copy thereof be sent to the Lord Chamberlain of the King's household for the time being, fourteen days at least before the acting, representing or performing thereof, together with an account of the playhouse or other place where the same shall be and the time when the same is intended to be first acted, represented or performed, signed by the master or manager, or one of the masters or managers of such playhouse or place, or company of actors therein. ¹⁷

During the eighteenth century, English theatres commonly disguised their plays as pantomime burlettas — song and dance shows — so as to get around the Lord Chamberlain's censorship examiners who enforced the Licensing Act of 1737. In 1843 the floodgates of change were opened with the replacement of the Licensing Act by the Theatre Regulation Act, which allowed all theatres to present a range of entertainment, subject, of course, to the approval of the Lord Chamberlain. By the 1850s pantomime burlettas had become associated with Christmas only and spoken dialogue was an essential ingredient.

The Examiner of Plays exercised the Lord Chamberlains' authority in matters of religion and politics. The free expression of sexual problems and the use of sexual humor were not part of the Victorian public taste,



which was very conservative in these matters, and so such topics were also absent from the stage. With religious and political controversies existing in the limelight during the Victorian period English dramatist if allowed would most probably have expressed them in their pieces. This legal exclusion of politics and religion from the stage made many feel that the drama was trivial and isolated from mainstream English life.¹⁸

Oscar Wilde, in a letter written from Paris in 1892 to his artist friend William Rothenstein, made no secret of his contempt for the Lord Chamberlain's enforcement of censorship:

“The Gaulois, the Echo de Paris and the Pall Mall have all had interviews. (About the banning of *Salomé*). The licenser of the plays is nominally the Lord Chamberlain, but really a commonplace official — in the present case a Mr. Pigott, who panders to the vulgarity and hypocrisy of the English people, by licensing every low farce and vulgar melodrama. He even allows the stage to be used for the purpose of the caricaturing of the personalities of artists, and at the same moment when he prohibited *Salomé*, he licensed a burlesque of *Lady Windermere's Fan* in which an actor dressed up like me.... The curious thing is this: all the arts are free in England, except the actor's art; it is held by the Censor that the stage degrades and that actors desecrate fine subjects, so the Censor prohibits not the publication of *Salomé* but its production....”¹⁹

The *Importance of Being Earnest* was originally completed as a four-act play but George Alexander, the manager of the St. James' Theatre, where it was scheduled to run, wished to shorten the play in order that a “curtain raiser” could be accommodated. He also wanted a play in which he could star as Jack, the romantic, so he cut down on the scenes in which Jack did not play a major part.²⁰ The four-act version was never submitted to the Lord Chamberlain but the three-act version was apparently licensed without difficulty.

In 1943 an amendment of the Theatre Act repealed all but superficial censorship regulations by the Lord Chamberlain. However, the Wolfenden Report of 1956 entrenched homosexuality as a crime with the maximum penalty for buggery being life imprisonment. By the early 1960s, homosexual characters were appearing on stage “primarily as the limp-wristed queen or the maiden aunt of high camp pantomime.” (Lahr, 1978 pg. 156.)

In order to circumvent the assertive scrutiny of the Theatre Act censors, Oscar Wilde included deliciously subtle in-jokes in *Earnest* — which, no doubt, delighted his intimate friends in queer subculture of the day. Looking back again at the Time/Action matrix, we can see, peppered throughout the play, instances of homosexual innuendo as per the descriptions given by renowned Wildean scholar Christopher Craft. Craft, in his article *Alias Bunbury: Desire and Termination in The Importance of Being Earnest*,²⁰ declares that Oscar Wilde was unable to “admit or acknowledge the erotic force of the gay male body “and as a result cleverly



depicted a “flickering presence-absence of the play’s homosexual desire.”

Craft points out three ready examples of this, the first of which is the line in the opening scene of act one, “It is a very ungentlemanly thing to read a private cigarette case.” Oscar Wilde was notorious for giving silver cigarette cases to the male prostitutes as payment with inscriptions such as “To X from O.W.). Craft postulates that “these cigarette cases are remarkably rich metonyms of Wilde’s sexual practice.” (Craft 1991, 122)

Secondly, the reference to “sprinkling” and the “cottages” when Canon Chasuble is summoned to rechristen Jack as Ernest. Craft points out that in the original four-act version of the play the following lines appear:

“Oh, I am not by any means a bigoted Paedobaptist [or “sprinkler of boys”] ... You need have no apprehensions [about immersion].... Sprinkling is all that is necessary... I have two similar ceremonies to perform ... A case of twins that occurred recently in one of the outlying cottages...”

Craft’s affinity with Wilde causes him to muse, “If Paedobaptist was too blatantly obscene to survive revision, then the more subtly insinuated “outlying cottages” was not: only an elite audience would have known that ... cottage had currency as a camp signifier for a trusting site, usually a public urinal.” (Craft 1991, 124).

Thirdly, the muffin orgy scene at the end of act two is defined by Craft as “luxurious and indolent gluttony that, by axiomatically transposing sexual and gustatory pleasures, operates as a screen metaphor for otherwise unspeakable pleasures.” He goes on to say that “Wilde adopts a polite decorum in order to display and displace a desire to bury in the bun.”

Without going into excessive detail about Bunbury and Bunburying, suffice to say that Wilde’s character “Mr. Bunbury” symbolizes not only a desire to “Bury in the Bun,” as Craft points out, but clearly represents a dalliance with “the pleasures of a double life.” (Craft 1991, 125). The Time/Action chart indicates obvious reference to Bunbury or Bunburying in seven scenes — all occasions in which in-jokes with naughty double-meanings can be assigned.

...

When Joe Orton wrote *What the Butler Saw*, he was worried he may “raise the eyebrows of the Lord Chamberlain” (Diary, 21 December 1966), especially in relation to the Churchill phallus, but he was needlessly concerned because by the time the play opened in London’s West End in March 1969, there was no Lord Chamberlain to censor it. Ironically, contrary to popular belief, it was Sir Ralph Richardson who turned the missing part of Winston Churchill from a penis into a cigar. John Lahr laments that, “What was intended as one final outlandish image of triumph stage anarchy merely became a giggle.” (Lahr 1978, 273).

“I’d like to write a play as good as *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Orton had said, in 1966, when asked about his ultimate aims.” (Lahr 1978, 277).



So in his personal challenge to “Out-Wilde Wilde,” he put previously taboo themes of homosexuality, transvestism, hermaphroditism, prostitution, rape, bastardy, and necrophilia back on the English stage after an excruciatingly long period of heavy-handed censorship. Lines such as Mrs. Prentice to Dr. Prentice “Admit that you prefer your sex to mine, I’ve no hesitation in saying that I do,” or Dr. Rance’s statement that “Men imagine a preference for women is a proof of virility. Someone should really write a book on these folk myths” prove that talk of “Bunburying,” or homosexual practice, was not only tolerated but celebrated on the stage.

It’s no surprise, therefore that the most exciting in-jokes in *What the Butler Saw* are the sublime references to *The Importance of Being Earnest* — in-jokes which would have been greatly appreciated by the queer subculture society of its day. For example *Earnest’s* plot deals with a double identity of Jack and Algernon and the emergence of the second self named Ernest; an event which is visually depicted by the vertical stripes on the Time Action chart — when characters is representing themselves as someone else. In *Butler* Orton out-Wildes Wilde with a more complicated version of *Earnest’s* multiple identity issues with “dizzying ... bewildering sexual double bluffs, scarcely sure at some points whether we’re confronted with a girl dressed as a boy who is being taken for a boy who thinks himself a girl or vice-versa.” (Worth, pg. 154). There are several in-jokes about being found in handbags, and the twins’ elephant brooch in *Butler* works as the same kind of plot driving visual device as the *Earnest’s* handbag.

But the most magnificent in-joke of all is one that, in my research, has not been documented by any of Orton’s specialists or critics. At the end of the play, Dr. Rance is maniacally joyful that “Double incest is even more likely to produce a best-seller.” A clear case of Orton out-Wilding Wilde because in *Earnest*, there is only a single case of incest — when Jack discovers he is Algy’s brother. The ancestral re-alignment genetically positions him as cousin to his betrothed, Gwendolyn.

Scoresheet:

In-jokes Wilde: 10/10 Bunburying beyond the call of duty

Orton: 10/10 for outrageous in-jokes and parody.

Running tally: Wilde: 70.5 Orton 66

(Image montage on screen: Joe Orton with switchblade and hideous expression . Caption: “Returns from the grave to seek revenge”)

Gameshow avatar: And that’s it? But that’s not fair. Orton did outWilde Wilde, it’s just that he didn’t have as many puns. Orton seemed at the point of defeating the laws of gravity in the theatre. Orton bounded through his short life and his brilliant plays with such velocity that you would logically expect him to excel at the scorecard by the time the in-joke category was complete. Ignominious he should be pounded by a extra few puns. But I could be valuable to his cause by inventing another category at which I know he can excel. But will it be allowed, it doesn’t show up on the



precious Time Action Charts. It will rely on the kindness of those scholars and critics that were spoken of derogatorily — for not figuring out the incest angle. Will they forgive me — their posit note tongues still flapping in the breeze ... some of whom have not as yet been given a single chance ... mention me, mention me they still chant ...

...

Parody, Subversion, and Social Commentary

When examining the use of subversion and parody in the work of Oscar Wilde and Joe Orton, it's useful to re-examine the definition of these terms. According to the online version of the American Heritage dictionary, to "subvert" is "to destroy completely; to ruin" or "to undermine the character, morals, or allegiance of; to corrupt." The meaning of "parody" is "a literary or artistic work that imitates the characteristic style of an author or a work for comic effect or ridicule."

The tactics of scholars and academics when describing subversive intent in the work of Oscar Wilde seems to be based on understated social rebellion. A common belief is that Oscar Wilde was an arrogant snob and an unmitigated social climber." However, a case is made in George Woodcock's *The Paradox of Oscar Wilde*, to support an argument that Wilde was, indeed, an "intellectual snob" but not a "social snob." Woodcock asserts that "he found out that the aristocrats did not ever justify their wealth or privileges by displaying virtue or serving any social purpose and he quickly came to despise the majority of them. In his play they became the most grotesque figures, the Lady Bracknells and Lord Cavershams; upper class stupidity.... Of the nobility he once remarked, "They are nothing but exaggerated farmers." (Woodcock, pg 142) A contrary opinion is voiced by John Lahr who claims that "When we look at Lady Bracknell, she's the most ordinary, common, direct woman... not an affected woman at all."²²

Lorna Elizabeth Wood, in her Yale University dissertaion, *Structure of Dissent: Oscar Wilde's Legacy in the Works of Joe Orton and Tom Stoppard*²³ takes an exaggerated attitude about Wilde's subversive intentions by claiming that "Wilde exploits the individualism that market society generates and subverts its artificial structures.... he shows how its [market society] individualism and artifice might be used to transcend its values."

I don't position myself to support her claim in reference to Oscar Wilde but she makes a strong argument when she turns this same theory towards the work of Joe Orton. In the same dissertation, she demonstrates that "for Orton, Wildean subversion continues to be liberating, but subversion must expose the realities disguised by artifice. *What the Butler Saw* parodies *Ernest's* idea of liberating society merely by subverting those structures. Orton uses Wilde's self-consciousness about artificial constructs to engage them in destabilizing play with the signified. This effects a liberation comparable to Ernest's."



When we follow Wood's logic and apply it to beliefs about the perils of an overheated market society²⁴ we can see that Orton strikes a strong note of satire when he sets his dramatic narrative in the environment of a market society run amuck. Reasonable utilitarianism is transformed into narcissistic hedonism; science becomes dominated by objectives of profit and power; and irrationality flourishes together with bizarre cults offering to individuals the false sense of a pseudo-community.

Examination of compiled research yields a plethora of additional commentary on social and political subversion in the work of Joe Orton. Critics, academics, and scholars have joined forces to affirm the dynamic effects of Orton's subversive intentions. An interesting example is provided by Katherine Worth when she observes that "this dream subversiveness ... is a diabolical holiday from social commentary.... Orton's farces seem to be playing the game of working out dark fantasies in extravagant comic terms that both express and exorcise them." (Worth 1972, 149)

In a footnote to her above observation, Worth calls into question John Lahr's contradictory attitude about Orton's propensity for social commentary. "Lahr draws some precise social morals, comparing Inspector Truscott of *Loot* to Spiro Agnew and Dr. Rance with the Nixon administration in his *Evergreen Review* article 'Artist of the Outrageous.'" (Worth 1979, 149 footnote) I agree that Lahr's foray into the arena of American political satire requires a giant leap of faith but consider Dr. Rance's quote in act two, "I represent our government, your immediate superiors in madness," and then think of Richard Nixon shaking his jowls in defense of Watergate. (The biggest hole in that theory is that Richard Nixon wasn't elected to the presidency until 1968, a year after Joe Orton's death.)

In a more practical application of Joe Orton's political satire, in the chapter entitled "Fairies against Fascism," Simon Shepherd, author of *Because We're Queers* insists that Orton's most extended anger was reserved for Winston Churchill, a British figurehead of enormous importance. Shepherd summarizes Churchill's role in the play by reminding us that "the statue of Churchill is blown up in a Gas Board explosion, leading to the castration of the replica of the national hero." Shepherd then comes in for the kill by saying, "The play's attack is aimed precisely at the combination of ideas represented by Churchill: propriety, tradition, masculinity, nationalism; ... the attack is a gay attack on virile nationalism."²⁵

Susan Rusinko varies the theme slightly by saying that Orton's chosen idiom of subversity is sexual perversity. This clearly represents, as she puts it "a gleeful thrashing of authority." Further, she says "In this respect he extends existing boundaries even as he stays within the confines of conventional farce, in which happy endings for the characters prevail, however socially demeaning and perverse their nature. (Rusinko 1995, ix).



Scoresheet:

Subversion Wilde: 1 Orton: 7

Final tally: Oscar Wilde: 71.5 Joe Orton 74

Audio FX: Sound of a slot machine hitting the jackpot

...

Conclusion

In conclusion, it seems clear that Joe Orton was successful in his goal — of writing a play as good as *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Even though we're comparing apples to oranges in terms of genre, a comedy of manners against a black farce, the evidence stacks up in favour of Joe Orton attaining at least equal excellence in terms of dramatic action, comic timing, richness of characterization, uniqueness of plot devices, in-joking and treatment of sexuality. Oscar Wilde is unsurpassable in terms of the resplendence of his witticisms and “quotable quotes,” but Orton excels in sign gags and the nature of his social and political commentary.

...

Their Legacies

Besides the resemblances in their backgrounds and their plays, there are other notable similarities in the lives of Oscar Wilde and Joe Orton. Their co-dependent homosexual spouseslike relationships caused them both jail time and, I venture to say, the eventual demise of their creative endeavors. Wilde's criminal incarceration was the fault of his relationship with his lover Lord Alfred Douglas (Bosey) and the vicious legal battle which ensued between Bosey's father, The Marquis of Queensbury and Oscar Wilde. After Wilde's incarceration his creative inspiration virtually withered and the only literary piece he managed to eek out was *The Ballad of Reading Goal*.

Orton's criminal incarceration was the fault of his collaboration with his lover, Kenneth Halliwell and the charges against them which ensued after they “defaced” books from the Islington Public Library. In contrast to Wildes' creative extinguishment, Orton “glossed over his prison experience, ‘Prison did not make me bitter, I enjoyed it very much,’ ... he told the *Daily Sketch*. To the Evening Standard Orton swaggered: I didn't suffer or anything the way Oscar Wilde suffered from being in prison — but then Wilde was flabby and self-indulgent.” (Lahr, 1977 pg. 126)

In terms of legacy, Oscar Wilde has left us with a vast and richly varied body of work, including my first exposure to Oscar Wilde's work — a beautiful children's story called *The Happy Prince* which loves as a tale of kindness and love:



'Dear little Swallow,' said the Prince, 'you tell me of marvellous things, but more marvellous than anything is the suffering of men and of women. There is no Mystery so great as Misery. Fly over my city, little Swallow, and tell me what you see there.'

So the Swallow flew over the great city, and saw the rich making merry in their beautiful houses, while the beggars were sitting at the gates. He flew into dark lanes, and saw the white faces of starving children looking out listlessly at the black streets. Under the archway of a bridge two little boys were lying in one another's arms to try and keep themselves warm. 'How hungry we are!' they said. 'You must not lie here,' shouted the Watchman, and they wandered out into the rain.

Then he flew back and told the Prince what he had seen.

'I am covered with fine gold,' said the Prince, 'you must take it off, leaf by leaf, and give it to my poor; the living always think that gold can make them happy.'²⁶

Compare this with the legacy of Joe Orton — as well as his dramatic work, an artistic legacy lives on in the art underground as an act of supreme pop culture creativity — his photomontaged “defaced” book covers. In 2001, British book artist David Ferry wrote in his artistic statement for the exhibition *Aspects Of Our National Heritage*:

Despite the amazing advances in reprographic technologies I prefer the absolute touch and feel of 'cut and paste' photomontage. This action is advanced directly onto an existing publication and therefore becomes a defiled book. Watching the film *Prick up Your Ears* (based on the playwright Joe Orton's life) I saw the act of defilement as a deliberate artistic act, i.e. that a book existed but you could contribute to it as an artist.²⁷

The legacies of Oscar Wilde and Joe Orton will live on in their work, their influences and in the exceptionally fine films and continuing performances on stage that capture both their work and their art. Brian Gilbert's (Director) 1977 film *Wilde* starring Stephen Frye as Oscar Wilde and Stephen Fear's (Director) 1987 film *Prick Up Your Ears* starring Gary Oldman as Joe Orton brilliantly capture aspects of both men's work, lives and loves. Now that *The Importance of Being Earnest* is in the public domain, it is a mainstay of student and amateur performance throughout the English world. Despite the continual violence and rude language we enjoy on TV and in movies in the third millennium, theatre patrons continue to storm out of What the Butler Saw for reasons ranging from perceived crimes against women to the negative depiction of mental illness. Both men would have been proud.



Notes

1. Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, in *Modern Drama Volume One*, ed. W.B. Worthen (Fort Worth, TX.: Harcourt Brace & Co. 1995), 114; hereafter cited in text.
2. Joe Orton, *What the Butler Saw*, in *Orton, The Complete Plays*, introduced by John Lahr (London: Eyre Methuen Ltd. 1976), 26; hereafter cited in text.
3. Joy Melville, *Mother of Oscar: The Life of Jane Francesca Wilde*, (John Murray, 1994) reprinted on *The Knitting Circle* www.sbu.ac.uk/stafflag/oscarwilde.html
4. Lady Wilde (Speranza), *The Leprechaun*, from *Lady Wilde's Ancient Legends of Ireland*, London, Ward and Downey, 1888, reprinted on <http://home.arcor.de/oscar.wilde/biography/speranza.htm>
6. John Lahr, *Prick Up Your Ears, The Biography of Joe Orton* (New York: Avon, 1980), 48.
7. Winston Churchill speaks in the British House of Commons, June 4, 1940.
8. A quote from *The London Observer*.
9. Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2000); 81.
10. John Lahr, *Prick Up Your Ears, The Biography of Joe Orton* (New York: Avon, 1980), 74; hereafter cited mostly in text.
12. Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2000),599.
13. Joe Orton, *The Orton Diaries* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers Inc., 1986), 251. Hereafter cited in text.
14. *American Heritage Dictionary Online*. Bartleby.com.; hereafter cited in text.
15. Katharine Worth, *Revolutions in Modern English Drama* (London: G. Bell, 1973), 153.
16. John Lahr, *Prick Up Your Ears, The Biography of Joe Orton* (New York: Avon, 1980), 144; hereafter cited mostly in text.
17. Statutes at large, vol. 5 (London: Eyre & Strahan, 1811), 266-8. Reprinted on <http://www.english.upenn.edu>
18. Mona Mohajer, *The London Theatre around 1800*, <http://www.english.upenn.edu>.
19. Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2000); 531.
20. Ruth Berggren, *The Complete Four-Act Version of The Importance of Being Earnest* (New York: Vanguard Press Inc., 1987) 31.
22. John Lahr, *Prick Up Your Ears, The Biography of Joe Orton* (New York: Avon, 1980), 203; hereafter cited mostly in text.
23. Lorna Elizabeth Wood, *Structures of Dissent: Oscar Wilde's Legacy in the Works of Joe Orton and Tom Stoppard* (Yale University PhD dissertation, 1992), Abstract.
24. The negative symptoms of a "perfect market society" are listed on Udenrigsministeriet, Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign affairs.
25. Simon Shepherd, *Because We're Queers* (London, GMP Publishers Ltd., 1989, 150-151.
26. Oscar Wilde, *The Happy Prince*. Reprinted on www.eserver.org/fiction/oscar-prince.html
27. David Ferry, *Aspects of Our Natural Heritage Exhibition Website*. <http://www.in-print.org.uk/artists/book-farrer.shtml>.



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South Bank University "The Knitting Circle."

<http://www.sbu.ac.uk/stafflag/joeorton.html> and

<http://www.sbu.ac.uk/stafflag/oscarwilde.html>

This site which is written and edited by the Lesbian and Gay Staff Association of South Bank University, London, features resources on lesbian and gay issues with special emphasis on higher education.

University of Pennsylvania

<http://www.english.upenn.edu>

This site from the English department of the University of Pennsylvania features an area which reprinted the 1737 Licensing Act and features historical articles about London in the Victorian era.

In-Print, Evolution in Contemporary Printmaking,

<http://www.in-print.org.uk/artists/book-farrer.shtml>

This site is a descriptive catalogue of In-Print, Evolution in Contemporary Printmaking, a touring exhibition from Howard Gardens Gallery / University of Wales Institute / Cardiff which brings together elements of current and recent Fine Art printmaking. It records and shows recent changes in outlook and ideas by artists who explore new potentials and concepts of the printed image in the light of (and possibly despite) new materials and new technologies. It includes artists whose work and practice may represent the antithesis of new technology in the field of Fine Art print and print research

Udenrigsministeriet, Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs

<http://www.um.dk>

This site contains an article entitled "Confusion Between a Market Economy and a Market Society."

The Importance of Being Earnest – Act One

Genre -- Comedy of manners ; A comedy satirizing the attitudes and behavior of a particular social group, often of fashionable society.

Dramatic Structure	EXPOSITION					
	ACT ONE					
Chapters (scenes)	1	2	3	4	5	6
	Jack and Lane establish social status	Algy muses about the lower orders	Enter Earnest	Lane brings in the cigarette case	Jack explains that's he's Jack in the country and Ernest in town	Meet Lady Bracknell and Gwendolyn
Servants						
Gwendolyn						
Cecily						
Jack						
Lady Bracknell						
Miss Prism						
Algernon Mischief						
Canon Chasuble						
The Handbag (background pattern signifies verbal mentions)						
Quotable (standalone) Puns and Witticisms	I don't play accurately but I play with wonderful expression.	If the lower orders don't set us a good example, what on earth's the use of them really?	When one is in town one amuses oneself. When one is in the country one amuse other people.		1. Now produce your explanation and pray make it improbable. 12. The amount of women who flirt with their own husbands is scandalous. It looks so bad. 3. Only relatives or creditors ring in that Wagnerian manner.	1. It would leave no room for developments and I intend to develop in many directions. 2. If one plays good music people don't listen and if one plays bad music people don't talk.
Spillover quotable quotes			Girls never marry the men they flirt with. They don't think it's right.		4. Literary criticism in not your forte. . . . You should leave that to people who haven't been at a University. 5. Nothing amays people so much as not receiving invitations.	Illness of any kind is hardly a thing to be encouraged in others. Health is the primary duty of life.
Homosexual innuendo (as per Croft)				Cigarette case		
References to Earnestness I				X		
References to Bunbury				X		X
Non-verbal Sight Gags						
Legend of Characters		Canon Chasuble			Algernon Moncrieff	

