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"De-Dandification" and the "Name of the Father": Masculinity and Fatherhood in Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*

By Tanner Sebastian

Abstract

Critics have long speculated the exact subversions of Victorian society Oscar Wilde intended in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, but fatherhood has been largely ignored as a potential target. In this paper, I tackle the titular pun on Ernest, which not only happens to be Jack Worthing's real name, but also his biological father's. I argue that Jack, who struggles throughout the play to overcome his lack of any biological parents and family name, essentially "becomes" the father whose absence almost costs him his marriage to Gwendolyn. I first establish that the character of Jack (and his partner-in-crime, Algernon) are intended to represent Victorian gentlemen through exploring the edits Wilde made between his original four-act edition of the play and the three-act version most often performed today. Then, I discuss how Jack and Algernon represent the Victorian gentleman, who generally viewed his relationship to his father as antagonistic. The subversion, I argue, is that these two Victorian gentlemen "become" their father by taking on his name, Ernest, to pursue their respective relationships. Thus, the Victorian gentleman believes he is fighting against his father's influence but in reality becomes the same man his father was. Wilde's use of the name "Ernest" acts as a subtle signal for this subversion so that Wilde's dandy audience can laugh at the gentleman's expense without his knowledge.

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"All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does. That's his."

- Algernon, Act I, *The Importance of Being Earnest*

Contemporary critics of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* have been fascinated by the portrayal of women in the play through the characters of Gwendolyn Fairfax and Cecily Cardew. Helen Davies has remarked that their resistance to marriage and competing against one another (seen in the scene in which both ladies realized they have been "wronged" by their would-be grooms) only comes about when Gwendolyn and Cecily become "sisters," or female friends (Davies 182-184). On this discussion of feminism in the play, Eva Thienpoint adds an interesting and, in my opinion, unexamined twist: textual editing. Thienpoint explores not only the three-act edition of *Earnest*, but also Wilde's original four-act version of the play. Unlike several critics who claim the four-act is how Wilde intended *Earnest* to be, Thienpoint disagrees, declaring that Gwendolyn and Cecily are stronger, more determined women in the three-act edition by manipulating their male fiancés into chasing them into the house (249). More significant, however, is Thienpoint's discussion of Cecily Cardew's reimagining from simply stupid in the four-act edition to determined and benevolently manipulative in the three-act, with Thienpoint concluding this change was intended by Wilde to subvert Victorian society (251).

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What has yet to be thoroughly analyzed, however, is how the characters of Algernon and Jack/Ernest evolved with their fiancées between the two editions. Notably, Thienpoint does make a few claims about the character of Jack:

> If, in the earliest sketch of the play, Jack was based on the Melodrama Gentleman, the personification of Victorian ideal manliness, an honest, industrious, serious and protective male, in the four-act text he is hardly recognisable as such. Instead, Jack is fully engaged in the game of the double life. (253-254)

For Thienpoint, the Jack of the four-act *Earnest* lacks the traits of a Victorian Gentleman. In this paper, I build on this assertion and extend the same scrutiny to the character of Algernon. For both Jack and Algernon, a "de-dandification" occurs in Wilde's edits, so that the characters in the three-act are closer to Victorian gentlemen than dandies. Once I have established that Jack and Algernon represent Victorian gentlemen, I will show how this shift allows Wilde to parody the Victorian gentleman's relationship to his father through the use of the name "Ernest" as the name of Jack's biological father.

Before I can discuss male gender expression, however, I must briefly explain male gender according to the Victorians. In his book *Dandies and Desert Saints*, James Eli Adams qualifies that "masculine identities are multiple, complex, and unstable constructions, even within the framework of a particular culture" (3). In spite of this, Adams identifies six categories into which Victorian men molded their masculinity, of which two are important to our discussion: the gentleman and the dandy. For Adams, both of these forms of "men" are based around the idea of self-discipline; for the gentleman, discipline of the self allows him to be reserved and restrained, particularly in regards to sexual expression, but

also aggressive in business, when it was the "proper time" (6-7). The dandy, on the other hand, shows restraint in some areas, such as the proper time to speak in a conversation, but not in the areas of luxury, speech and wit. For the dandy, there is more awareness of the theatricality of gender display (10). These definitions of "gentleman" and "dandy" I have used to form my arguments.

In the four-act edition of *Earnest*, both Jack and Algernon exhibit the traits of the "dandy." The strongest evidence for the four-act Jack as a representation of a dandy is found in the first act. Jack describes a bill for 700 pounds at the Savoy, a restaurant, which he has accrued as his personae, Ernest (*The Original Four-Act* 10). Jack refuses to pay the bill, claiming that Ernest's reputation depends on it. In fact, Jack, as it is discovered in the second act, created the debt after one night of dining. This frivolous spending of money on food and champagne shows a complete lack of self-restraint for the sake of entertainment, the trademark of a dandy. In the second act, Jack calls the debt "reckless extravagance" when he is chastising Algernon in spite of the fact that the debt actually belongs to Jack (52). Some may argue this scene in Act One only sets up a comical scene in Act Two, "The Gribsby Incident," in which Algernon, posing as Ernest, is almost arrested for the debt, until Jack finally pays for Ernest's (his) behavior. It is most important to note, however, that these two connected scenes are cut from the three-act. Jack has no debts to be settled in the three-act, showing a more restrained character by the scenes' absences.

In another example of Jack's dandyism displayed through eating, Algernon comments when Jack begins eating bread and butter to be served to Gwendolyn at tea-time. In the four-act, Algernon remarks, "Well, my dear fellow, you need not eat it all" (*The Original Four Act* 5), while in the three-act, the line is slightly different: "…you need not eat as if you

were going to eat it all" (*The Importance* 30). The implication of the former is that Jack has consumed most of the offered food; for the latter, the "as if" puts Jack's devouring of the bread into a solely hypothetical situation. He is not actually eating all of Gwendolyn's bread. This shows that Jack is more restrained in the three-act and is therefore closer to a gentleman.

Jack also displays more theatricality in the four-act edition, calling attention to himself in several lines cut for the three-act. After Algernon admits to the nature of Bunbury, the imaginary friend for whom Algernon leaves town to enjoy the country, Jack interjects, "What nonsense," ruining the flow of Algernon's speech and calling the readers' (and audience's) attention back to Jack. Jack, in the four-act, seems much needier for the attention of the other characters than in the three-act. There are similar moments throughout the rest of the four-act; these lines are non-existent in the three-act. An argument could be made that Wilde was just improving his writing; removing those interjections improve the flow of the piece and speeches, creating a quicker pace and a better focus on the individual speakers. I can concede this is a possible explanation for Wilde's edits, but when paired with the previous description of Jack's luxurious behavior in regards to food, it appears the deeper intention of de-dandification really drove Wilde to edit his characters.

Jack's general behavior also shifts between the two editions. At the end of Act One in the four-act, Gwendolyn leaves with her mother, Lady Bracknell, and Algernon and Jack have a brief chat that ends the act. By contrast, in the three-act, Jack shows far more respect to Gwendolyn, walking her to her coach in spite of Bracknell's denial of their engagement (*The Importance* 47). Contrarians could argue that having Jack exit with Gwendolyn allows Algernon the chance to talk with his butler about sneaking off to visit Cecily, progressing the plot. However, Jack's escorting of Gwendolyn is not only well-timed aggression, for he knows he may

never talk to her again because of Bracknell, but also a type of restraint, for he does not throw a tantrum or express hatred towards Bracknell to Gwendolyn, but hides his opinion until he is alone with Algernon (*The Importance* 44-7).

Algernon's de-dandification is far more subtle. Most critics agree that Algernon is the dandy of the three-act of *Earnest* (Wilde included a dandy in all of his comedies). I do not contest this description of Algernon; however, in comparing the three-act Algernon to the four-act incarnation, there is evidence to suggest that the later Algernon behaves less like a dandy than his earlier counterpart. Many of the four-act Algernon's witty quips were removed. One such example seems to call attention to the fact that Algernon is a dandy:

> JACK: Do you always really understand what you say, Algy?
> ALGERNON [*after considerations*]: Yes…if I listen attentively.
> (*The Original Four-Act* 12)

In these lines, Jack calls out Algernon for not actually knowing what he is really saying. Oscar Wilde, an infamous dandy, received similar criticism about his own wit. Jure Gantar, in the introduction to his book *The Evolution of Wilde's Wit*, describes how contemporary critics of Wilde described his witticisms as "mechanical," that they lack meaning and can be produced by following a simple formula (6). Like Wilde, the four-act Algernon receives criticism from several characters about his wit. When Gwendolyn enters in Act One, Algernon greets her by calling her smart. After she replies, "I am always smart," Algernon jokes about the intelligence of women, with Gwendolyn retorting, "Now don't try to be clever, Algy. It doesn't become you at all" (*The Original Four-Act* 13). This reference to Algernon's unrestrained wit also signals his dandyism. By contrast, the three-act equivalent of this scene reveals more about Jack's version of masculinity. Gwendolyn replies, "I am always smart! Aren't I,

Mr. Worthing?" putting the focus to Jack's gentlemanly reply: "You're quite perfect, Miss Fairfax" (*The Importance* 35). By taking the focus off of Algernon's dandyism, Wilde creates a scene that further shows Jack's evolution into a gentleman, with polite respect for the fairer sex.

A similar case of cut lines altering Algernon's character occurs in the aforementioned "Gribsby Incident," found in the original second act of the four-act *Earnest.* When Gribsby demands payment from Algernon, who is posing as Ernest at this point, Algernon remarks that "No gentleman ever has any money" (*The Original Four-Act* 52). In response to similar lines regarding Algernon's lack of finances in the three-act, Jeremy Lalonde notes that this is the quintessential dandy, valuing looks and the presentation of wealth over the real thing (662). While Wilde still kept many references to Algernon's financial status in the three-act edition, he omitted "The Gribsby Incident," a scene which directly focused on it. Wilde clearly wants Algernon to remain a dandy, and yet, the characterization is not as overdone as in the four-act. This was intentional, for by limiting Algernon's dandyisms, Wilde places Algernon in a realm of male gender between dandy and gentleman.

In addition to finances, Algernon also quips about fashion and style choices (primarily Jack's) in both editions of *Earnest*. Wilde was known for his own unique fashion sense and was often mocked for it by his contemporaries (Gantar 131). As a fashion icon of the time, Wilde liked to remark on style in relation to other aspects of life. One of Wilde's most well-known epigrams reads, "The only way to atone for being occasionally a little over-dressed is by being always absolutely over-educated" (Gantar 105). This epigram is found in *Earnest* in the form of a joke, in which Jack provides the set-up and Algernon the punchline:

JACK: Well, at any rate, that is better than being always overdressed as you are.

ALGERNON: If I am occasionally a little overdressed, I make up for it by being always immensely over-educated. (*The Importance* 59)

As Gantar mentions in *The Evolution of Wilde's Wit*, Oscar Wilde enjoyed this epigram so much that he also applied it to his other major work, *The Picture of Dorian Grey* (106). From this, we can conclude that Wilde made a philosophical connection, if not a personal one, with his character Algernon by giving him this beloved quip. It is evident, then, that Algernon was meant to be a dandy.

Yet, Wilde cut several of Algernon's remarks about Jack's fashion. In the original second act of the four-act edition, Algernon criticizes Jack because his clothes "don't fit him properly" and "His necktie is wrong" (*The Original Four-Act* 48). These are not particularly witty or funny remarks, except within context. Jack has just arrived at his country estate, dressed in garish black clothing to show he is mourning his "dead" brother Ernest. Algernon, who is pretending to be Ernest at this point, is not only making fun of Jack's fashion choice, but is also exposing the ridiculousness of Jack's performance of false grief and deception. And yet, in rewriting this scene, Wilde chose to remove these criticisms of Jack's appearance. Some perhaps would argue that these lines only serve to recall the visual gag of Jack's entrance, and this repetition of the joke fails to be funny. However, by removing these lines, Algernon loses presence in the scene, with one implication of his silence on Jack's wardrobe being that he is in fact restraining himself. In showing that Algernon can restrain his salacious tongue, Wilde shows a more socially cautious character that, in this moment, crosses over from dandy into gentleman behavior.

The de-dandification of Jack and Algernon in the three-act was intentional by Wilde: the number and the specific nature of his changes and omissions are difficult to explain away as "cut in the interest of time." The movement of male gender expression from dandy to gentleman

ultimately alters the humor in the piece, changing its meaning entirely. Critics have long noted that *Earnest*, the three-act version, works as social criticism and satire of Victorian morals, with the earliest critic determining this in the 1950s (Reinert 15). Exactly what is being parodied, however, has remained debated. Male gender seems to be a focus in Wilde's revisions between the editions, so it logically follows that male gender is what was being subverted. As I now can begin to argue, I suspect Wilde has shifted the targets of his parody from dandies to gentlemen in order to poke fun at the Victorian gentleman and his relationship to his father.

Knowing the climax of *Earnest* is Jack's frantic quest to find his biological father's name, it may seem bizarre that Eve Sedgwick has said that "The Name of the Father," (Ernest) is insignificant in the play. In fairness, Sedgwick's assertion is a direct attack against Christopher Craft's own opinion on "The Name of the Father," that it is confirmation that the character of Jack Worthing is homosexual (Sedgwick 57). Craft's argument is based on "Ernest" as a Victorian slang term for a homosexual male, which makes Jack's discovery of his real name, Ernest, also a discover of his sexuality (Craft 40). Both Sedgwick's denial of the importance of the name "Ernest" in the play and Craft's attachment of homosexual desire to "Ernest" oversimplify the play's titular pun into two categories Wilde himself applies to the play. For Sedgwick, "The Name of the Father" is trivial; for Craft, it is serious. I argue for a middle ground between these two critics, for the discovery of "Ernest" as the name of Jack and Algernon's biological father is extremely significant in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, but not in the sense of revealing the characters' sexuality. Instead, I argue that the name "Ernest" acts in two ways. First, "Ernest" works to subvert the Victorian gentleman's relationship with his father. Second, the term "Ernest" does work as part of Craft's homosexual subtext, but only so far as to appeal to and add a secret layer of meaning

for Wilde's dandy followers, allowing them to see the subversions Wilde's gentlemen audience would not have.

Before I discuss the subversion of Victorian fatherhood in *Earnest*, it would be helpful for some brief notes about the nature of fatherhood in the late 19th century. Scholars have studied the evolving rift between fathers and sons in the Victorian era due to the devaluing of land and property caused by the shift from agriculture and family businesses to industrialization. In *Dandies and Desert Saints*, James Eli Adams describes the "growing isolation of middle-class fathers from their sons" due to "[t]he expanding social mobility available to young men in an industrial society" (5). In other words, industrialization created a push for young men to enter the workforce alongside their fathers as opposed to staying at home in the domestic circle. Fathers and sons were now competing against one another for careers, causing tension between the generations.

This uneasiness between sons and fathers is reflected in the literature of the time period. Valerie Sanders extensively researched this literary phenomenon in her book *The Tragi-Comedy of Victorian Fatherhood*, and discovered that the sons in particular felt the most animosity towards their fathers. Sanders describes that "Victorian literature and life-writing are full of such stern fathers who are alien and other in their children's limited understanding, created from their perspective, rather than the father's own" (2). Essentially, sons who are authors often set a father-figure as an antagonist to the protagonist son's quest for independence. Sanders of course depicts a much more complicated, and often benevolent, picture of Victorian fathers later in the book, but the Victorian son's view towards his father is more pertinent for my argument.

The literary trend of the Victorian period was to demonize the father and use him as a hindrance to the protagonist's happiness.

Although Sanders focuses on novels and autobiographical writings, it is quite easy to show that Wilde uses this convention in his dramatic works, particularly *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Jack Worthing attempts to win Lady Bracknell's approval of his engagement to her daughter Gwendolyn, but loses his bride-to-be when he cannot name either biological parent. The situation is pushed to absurdity, with Lady Bracknell responding, "I would strongly advise you, Mr Worthing, to try and acquire some relations as soon as possible…[sic]" (*The Importance* 43). Here, Jack's conflict has commenced. His father (or, more accurately, the lack of his biological father) has prevented Jack from marrying Gwendolyn. Wilde's gentlemen audience would have been able to relate to Jack's plight, associating Jack's struggles caused by his father with their own perceived story, in which they are heroes who must overcome the challenges posed by their fathers.

Although Wilde uses this convention to set the events of the first two acts in motion, the third act eventually subverts this gentlemanly notion of the father's role in the son's life. When Lady Bracknell finally makes the realization that Jack is "the son of [her] poor sister, Mrs. Moncrieff, and consequently Algernon's elder brother [sic]," the play begins its race towards its climax, for Jack is in search of his Christian name (*The Importance* 85). After searching through army records, the revelation finally happens: Jack is actually Ernest, the name he has been using to get away from the country to visit the city. He is "Ernest after all" (*The Importance* 86). This is the revelation that nicely sets up Jack's closing line which explains the title: "On the contrary, Aunt Augusta, I've now realized for the first time in my life the vital Importance of Being Earnest" (*The Importance* 87). The play ends with a trivial pun that makes the audience laugh, and all in the audience go home entertained.

For the Victorian gentleman, this is how the play's ending works. The joke is that Jack has been Ernest the whole time; his lies are truth and his truth lies. The play ends shortly after this punchline. The couples are reunited, which means heteronormativity prevails, and it would seem all ends happily. None of the play's deceptions matter to anyone or change anyone's feelings towards one another. *Earnest*, to the Victorian gentleman, is truly a "Trivial Comedy for Serious People," as Wilde's subtitle suggests. But is the ending really this trivial? Has Wilde created this convenient revelation just for the pun of Ernest/earnest? I suspect not.

Because of the climactic revelation that Jack's name is Ernest, it is very easy to forget that Ernest is the name of Jack's biological father, General Ernest Moncrieff. The way in which Jack discovers his name may seem like a convenient plot device to be forgotten immediately, and yet, it affects the way the entire play is interpreted. A clever reader or audience member will be able to take this revelation that Jack is named after his father, Ernest, and reevaluate the previous events of the play through this new interpretive lens, one that I call "retrospective Ernest," having not seen a lens like this used in my research.

The application of "retrospective Ernest" is relatively simple. In Act One, we learn that Jack uses the name Ernest to escape his home in the country and spend time in the city (*The Importance* 32). Using "retrospective Ernest," we find that Jack uses his father's name for his activities in London. This hardly seems surprising. Recalling Adams's argument about industrialization, in which sons and fathers were in competition for careers within the public sphere, Jack's escape from his domestic life as the son "Jack" to join the public sphere of his father "Ernest" – whom he is embodying – shows Wilde's awareness of the changing dynamic between fathers and sons in Victorian society, but with

a twist: in entering the public sphere to compete alongside their fathers, the sons are essentially becoming their fathers, a fate that subverts the son's traditional view of being independent of, and eventually overthrowing, his father.

This subversion of the father as the Victorian son's antagonist is furthered by the romantic pursuits not only of Jack, but also Jack's brother Algernon. In Act Two, both men are simultaneously Ernest when their respective loves, Gwendolyn and Cecily, are together in Jack's country garden (*The Importance* 64-71). Both Gwendolyn and Cecily seem only interested in Jack and Algernon when their names are Ernest, and up until Act Three, both men are only engaged to their respective ladies so long as their names are Ernest. With "retrospective Ernest" in mind, these romantic exploits take on a subversive nature. It is only when Jack and Algernon take on the name of their biological father that they are able to win the hearts of their loves. In this case, the father is not hindering the son from getting what he wants out of life, but is instead helping him. The father in *The Importance of Being Earnest* is not the traditional antagonist he initially appears to be. Only through "retrospective Earnest" can this subversion of a Victorian literary motif be seen. For Wilde, the Victorian gentleman cannot see that in trying to be independent of his father, he actually becomes his father in the process, showing a lack of self-awareness that Wilde mocks in *Earnest*.

An important distinction is to be made when it comes to Wilde's assertion that the gentleman becomes his father. As stated earlier, the Victorian gentleman in literature attempts to overthrow his father's control; however, should the son fail to do this, he submits to his father's will and accepts his father's dominance. Wilde's assertion is *not* an expression of this submission. Ernest Moncrieff, Jack and Algernon's father, is not a physical presence in the play. Although he does fulfill the

role a literary father would as described earlier, Ernest Moncrieff remains absent, having died when Algernon was a baby (*The Importance* 86). Because of this, Jack and Algernon do not know their father. And yet, both Jack and Algernon naturally shift into playing "Ernest." Wilde seems to say that Victorian gentlemen *naturally* become their fathers even if their fathers are not present in their lives. Becoming the father is not a submissive act for Victorian gentlemen, then, but a naturally occurring phenomenon that gentlemen cannot control.

As I have argued thus far, the Victorian gentleman is the target of Wilde's criticism, but if this is so, Wilde has put himself in a predicament. Wilde's primary audience was Victorian gentlemen, and to poke fun openly at them would be biting the hands that fed. It is evident that the play is subversive to modern audiences, who can retrospectively see the criticism of Victorian culture in *Earnest*, but at the time of its premiere, the play was beloved by Victorian audiences. Victorian gentlemen were either not aware of the seriousness of the critique of their behavior in the play, or else were completely oblivious to it. It is entirely possible they believed Wilde was in jest, that this was indeed a "Trivial Comedy for Serious People." The heteronormative ending, in which the male characters are engaged to their respective loves with no consequences for lying to them, would support their opinion that the play was "trivial." But it is also just as likely that Victorian gentlemen could not see some of the subversions, such as that of their relationships to their fathers, because they were carefully hidden, available only to an exclusive group of audience members who could see the play through "retrospective Ernest." These subversions were exclusively for Wilde's dandy followers.

Wilde's own opinions on the play suggest that it was written with secret subtext and subversions for a dandy audience. Sos Eltis notes that *Earnest* is "described by the author himself as 'written by a butterfly for

butterflies'" (171). Many critics have debated the exact meaning of this quote, but it is not a stretch to connect the "butterfly" with dandyism. Wilde was perhaps better known for his dandy behavior than his writing ability, so his ties to fellow dandies would have been influential. Wilde also famously changed his subtitle from "A Serious Comedy for Trivial People" to "A Trivial Comedy for Serious People." If Victorian gentlemen are "serious" people, then it makes sense if dandies are the "trivial" ones. If *Earnest* can also be a "serious comedy," it is only so for dandies. Wilde appears to have revealed, through veiled language, that the play has political implications for a dandy audience. But as stated earlier, to express these implications openly would be a severe social misstep that could have ended his career (as evident by Wilde's trial). So, if the play has secret subversions only "for butterflies" to understand, how have these implications been hidden?

To answer this, I return to Christopher Craft's argument about homosexual subtext. Craft claims that Wilde includes references to prominent homosexual Victorian men with certain character names (i.e. Lady Bracknell) as well as the slang terms "Ernest" (a homosexual male) and "Bunbury" (anal penetration) to suggest Jack and Algernon are gay (27). Many critics, such as Joseph Bristow, have opposed this critical leap but have agreed that a homosexual subtext does exist in the work. I strongly agree with these latter critics, believing that the homosexual subtext is being used as signals to Wilde's dandy audience. By having such a homosexual subtext, Wilde appeals to his dandy audience by adding a subversive layer of meaning to *Earnest*. More importantly, Wilde highlights significant aspects of his play that would otherwise be missed by his gentlemen audience.

"Retrospective Ernest" is one such phenomenon. Because "Ernest" was a slang term for a homosexual, Wilde's dandies would have been

more inclined to hear it as a significant name (perhaps sharing Craft's opinion that Jack was secretly gay). However, as the dandies followed the name "Ernest" throughout the play, they would have realized that Jack and Algernon use the name to pursue heterosexual relationships, undermining their earlier perceptions. Still, the name's homosexual meaning would have made it stand out in the piece. When it is revealed that Ernest was the name of Jack's father, it is likely that the dandies, who had been paying closer attention to "Ernest" throughout the rest of the piece, would have been able to see the play through "retrospective Ernest." They would have been better able to connect that "Ernest's" true significance was that it was Jack's father's name because their expectations for "Ernest" were reversed by Wilde. Since the dandies would have been let down by "Ernest" not meaning the characters were gay, they would have been more open to seeing how it was actually being used in the play– in this case, to subvert the Victorian gentleman's relationship to his father.

The subversion lies in the ultimate desires of Victorian gentlemen: to become individuals with separate identities from their fathers. And yet, the Victorian gentlemen, in this pursuit, *become* their fathers by choosing an identical heteronormative, masculine identity. The dandies, on the other hand, were able to accomplish what their gentlemen counterparts could not. By creating a new version of masculinity, based on wit and expression, not restraint, Wilde and the other dandies freed themselves of what seemed to be the inevitable fate of gentlemen.

Of course, by this I do not mean to say that no dandies sired sons who also became dandies themselves. That would be creating a false equivalency between homosexuals and dandies. Neither is exclusive to the other. Instead, what I suggest is that the *culture* of dandyism, breaking away from the gentlemen normative for masculinity, valued this type of

independence. Where the dandies may have found humor in *Earnest* (and in gentlemen) is that the characters always have the option to fully embrace the dandy identity. Algernon certainly exhibits moments where his original dandy characterization from the four-act remains in the three-act version, which means Jack, too, has that option as well. Instead, the characters, believing they are acting independently of their absent father (and thus, earnestly), are exhibiting the same normative masculinity as their father (thus, "*Ernestly"*). Ultimately, Wilde creates a joke that his fellow dandies could understand, providing a commentary that mocks men who cannot seem to find the easy way out of an endless cycle of restrained masculinity.

The homosexual subtext of *The Importance of Being Earnest* does not make "The Name of the Father" a signal for homosexuality, but it does work to highlight the subversive significance that the name "Ernest" poses in the play. Choosing a name for Jack's father that not only creates a clever pun but also refers to a homosexual male creates a secret code exclusively for Wilde's dandy friends, revealing to them how the Victorian gentleman was unable to see that he *was* his father and not a hero born to overthrow his father's tyrannical rule. To claim that "The Name of the Father" is insignificant in *Earnest* is a trivial thought for a serious issue. "The Name of the Father" gives an alternate explanation for the homosexual subtext that is present in the play and also adds an additional layer of subversion against Victorian gentlemen. This subversion of the behavior and mindset of Victorian gentlemen in *The Importance of Being Earnest* deserves further consideration and exploration in future criticism.

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