



# FIELD GUIDE



Directed by Shawn Douglass

Featuring Greg Matthey Anderson, Annabel Armour, Kelsey Brennan, David Darlow, Linda Gillum, Ted Hoerl, Paul Hurley, and William J. Watt

November 24, 2010 - January 9, 2011  
Greenhouse Theater Center, 2257 N. Lincoln Avenue, Chicago

Field Guide written by Kelli Marino  
Designed by Charles Riffenburg IV and edited by Jim Manganello

*The Importance of Being Earnest* poster design by Robert Petrick

## Table of Contents

Interview with the director.....	2
Oscar Wilde's biography.....	5
Victorian England.....	6
Wilde's Final Play: Opening Night & Closing.....	8
Wilde as Irishman.....	9
Glossary.....	11
Names in the play.....	13
Victorian Manners.....	13

In a period distinguished by etiquette and social customs, Oscar Wilde wrote his masterful *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895).

Jack gets away from his country house on the pretext that he's bailing out his depraved brother, Ernest, in London. Algernon gets away from his London relations (including the dreaded Bracknell and her daughter Gwendolen) on the pretext that he's tending to a perpetually ill friend, Bunbury. But Algernon goes a step too far—according to Jack—when he “goes Bunburying” to court Jack's young ward, Cecily. Jack commits a similar transgression—at least according to Lady Bracknell—when he proposes to Gwendolen. With their romances deadlocked, Jack and Algernon work toward their *true* loves but become more and more entangled in their *false* stories. These machinations add up to what many would call the greatest comedy ever written.

Remy Bumpo includes *The Importance of Being Earnest* in our 2010/2011 season's exploration of “Secret Lives, Public Lies.” The comedy is not only a brilliant social satire on its surface, but when thrown into relief by Wilde's own double life, becomes a delicious mine-field of puns and double entendres, focusing on two young men who, like Wilde, are determined to keep their two lives separate. This Field Guide hopes to illuminate Wilde's life, his time, and how his work can resonate with a contemporary audience.

## Interview with the director

Production dramaturg Kelli Marino sits down with Shawn Douglass

**K**elli Marino. What relevance does this play have for our American society in the twenty-first century?

Shawn Douglass. The play, in spite of its age, continues to be devastatingly funny. A contemporary audience will still undoubtedly respond to the witty and farcical story of young love, an overbearing parent, female rivalry and hidden identities. Wilde's tightly constructed plot, great wit, and sharply drawn characters make for an exquisite evening in the theater.

Though Oscar Wilde was satirizing the very specific set of social norms of a small segment of Victorian society, the play retains a universal appeal for a couple of reasons. It is a relentlessly fun attack on snobbery of all sorts. Who doesn't like to see the pompous punctured? I'm also interested in how the play looks at the human need to construct public façades that either protect, or give license to, our private selves.

**KM. Some have said that this is Oscar Wilde's “perfect comedy.” Do you agree?**

SD. I think this *is* true, mostly because he was strict with himself in this play about a coherence of tone and style to the whole piece. This can't be said of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, for instance, which is really a melodrama with incursions of Wildean wit.

**KM. What excites you about directing this play?**

SD. The brilliance of the play is a given. That's a wonderful place to start. But even better is that we have a really experienced, smart, and funny cast—all of whom have proven track records at delivering the kind of witty language that Wilde has given us. That is going to make rehearsal a joy, because I am not going to have to spend a great amount of time talking about the style of the play. As a group, we'll just get to have fun choosing the best way, for us, of presenting it.

**KM. I remember a conversation about private versus public selves in relation to today's social media. David Kirkpatrick's book, *The Facebook Effect*, brought up Facebook Founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg**

**who stated, “You have one identity. The days of you having a different image for your work friends or co-workers and for the other people you know are probably coming to an end pretty quickly. Having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity.” What is your response to that as the director of *Earnest*?**

SD. I think that statement is absurd, frankly. Oscar Wilde’s own life, which included a traditional marriage as well as homosexual relationships with men, is a striking example of a human being inhabiting different identities to meet both the demands of society and one’s own desires. To have multiple identities, or ways of presenting ourselves to the world, is not only a practical and necessary social tool, it is deeply embedded in our humanity.

To elaborate a bit on your earlier question, this elasticity of persona, the shifting façades that mask the truth of another self, is an element of the play that makes it timeless for audiences. Today, as in 1895, we must have a shifting sense of self that allows us to respond in different ways to our co-workers, our neighbors, our lovers, our online friends, etc. It is not only useful, it can be a relief to be, for instance, both a number cruncher at work and an artist in your free time; or a disciplinarian with your children and a *bon vivant* with your friends.

Wilde presents us with some obvious examples of dual identities in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The characters of Algernon and Jack create alter egos for themselves so that they might indulge behavior that would be otherwise frowned upon in their social milieu. Jack reinvents himself as his “brother” Ernest, so that he may throw off the responsibilities of being a landowner and a guardian to his ward, Cecily. Algernon also takes on the character of Ernest as a way of meeting with Cecily, whose overactive imagination has conjured up romantic images of Jack’s wicked brother.

Wilde gives the audience these conventional theatrical versions of hidden identities, but he also explores moments in which the façade and the inner truth are expressed at the same time. For example, when Gwendolyn promises her love to her betrothed, telling him, “I never change, except in my affections,” she *is* both the ingénue the audience expects and *not*. She is both the lover *and* the businesswoman who needs to be sure that her match will be strong both romantically and financially. Wilde cracks the veneer, the façade, of each of these characters so that we see their outer pretense and their inner truth, at the same time. Much of the humor of the play lies in these collisions of inner and outer truth.

**KM. Do you have a double self?**

SD. How about triple, quadruple, and on and on? The persona I present as a teacher, as a director, and as an actor are all rooted in some core particularities of my persona I suppose, but there are many qualities that change for each of those roles. To say nothing of my roles as romantic partner, son, condo president, friend, ensemble member, etc.

I promise that I don’t have any double life as sneaky as that of Algernon and Jack, but there are certainly elements of each persona that are hidden or revealed depending on my role and the circumstances in which I find myself.

**KM. This play speaks to being one’s true self. Does the play lend an ear to those struggling with being accepted by others? Does it urge tolerance?**

SD. I think the play is not aggressive enough for it to *urge* anyone to do anything. It might *nudge* someone toward tolerance, I suppose. But only because we see in characters like Lady Bracknell, Gwendolen, and Jack the over importance we sometimes attach to societal expectations that don’t, in the end, add up to a whole lot. If we can laugh at *their* follies, we might soon be laughing at *our own* too. And if we recognize our own follies, perhaps we are more likely to forgive them in others. But mostly I think the play urges laughter.

**KM. What is your favorite line in this play?**

SD. Are you kidding me?! This is an *impossible* question to answer! It’s like asking which is your favorite course in the best meal you’ve ever had in your life. One of the things I love about the play is that *every* character has delicious moments and lines that are perfectly phrased.

**KM. If you were to adopt your own Wilde-esque witticism, what would it be?**

SD. Do you mean I have to make one up? Or do I get to steal one? (*Laughter*)

If I get to steal, I’ll take, “Life is far too important a thing ever to talk seriously about it.” spoken by Lord Darlington in *Lady Windemere’s Fan*.

## Who is Bunburying Today?

**Who:** Mark Sanford, Governor of South Carolina

**What:** Discovered having an affair with an Argentinean woman. Sanford said he was "hiking the Appalachian Trail" during the time he was visiting the woman in Argentina and was unreachable for seven days.

**How he was found out:** He was caught at the Atlanta airport after returning from Argentina.

**Results:** Resigned as Head of Republican Governors' Association. Divorced from wife. Paid the largest ethics fines in state history for his use of state planes for personal and political purposes.

After disappearing for a week in June 2009, telling his wife that he needed some alone time in the mountains, and informing his staff that he was leaving (though being rather vague about it all), South Carolina Governor Mark Sanford was cornered in the Atlanta airport returning from Buenos Aires, where he had been spending time with a woman he'd been having an affair with for a year. No one could contact him; no one knew exactly where he was.

The *North County Times* reported:

"I've been unfaithful to my wife," [Sanford] said in a news conference in which the 29-year-old governor ruminated on God's law, moral absolutes and following one's heart. He said he spent the last five days "crying in Argentina."

"What I did was wrong. Period," he said.

His family did not attend the news conference, and his wife, Jenny, said she asked the governor to leave and stop speaking to her two weeks ago. The governor said he wants to reconcile, and his wife's statement said her husband has earned a chance to resurrect their marriage.

"This trial separation was agreed to with the goal of ultimately strengthening our marriage," she said.

Ultimately, Sanford and his wife divorced and his reputation and hopes for Presidential candidacy vanished.

# Oscar Wilde

## Life of the author

On October 10, 1854, Sir William Wilde and Lady Jane Francesca Agnes Elgee welcomed their second son into the world; they named him Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde. The family belonged to Dublin's middle class, though Sir Wilde was Ireland's foremost ear and eye surgeon and the appointed occult to Queen Victoria. Oscar's mother was a revolutionary poet, furthering her Irish Nationalist views through the Young Ireland movement and writing several articles for magazines under the *nom-de-plume* Speranza (meaning Hope). Lady Wilde was also known for her afternoon salons, where she hosted several friends and movement supporters at her home to discuss politics and other worldly affairs, and where a young Wilde was privy to conversations of wit and intelligence.

As a boy, Wilde excelled in his academic studies, earning scholarships and the respect of his educators. Awarded a scholarship to study at Magdalen College at Oxford, Wilde was bullied for his Irishness. "My Irish accent," he would later recount, "was one of many things I forgot at Oxford." He continued to excel at his studies in classical literature and philosophy, winning awards for his poetry, and coming into his own as a young man. During his time at Magdalen, Wilde developed a contempt for authority, a highly decadent living space, and a reputation for a life devoted to pleasure. His academic career was also indicative of the coming Aesthetic Movement that advocated art for art's sake and beauty as its own end. After graduating in 1878, Wilde returned to Dublin and fell in love with Florence Balcombe, who later revealed that she was previously engaged to *Dracula* novelist Bram Stoker. Heartbroken, Wilde moved to London in 1879 with painter Frank Miles, where he met Constance Lloyd. The two married in 1884 and had two boys, Cyril and Vyvyan.

While in London, Wilde developed his poetry and literature, publishing *Vera; or The Nihilists* (1880) and *The Duchess of Padua* (1883). He traveled to America during 1881, giving lectures on Aestheticism, and later became editor of *Woman's World* magazine. During his first year of marriage a man named Robert Ross seduced Wilde; this was the first time that Wilde began to realize his own sexuality.

Ross introduced Wilde to Lord Alfred Douglas in 1891, with whom Wilde embarked on a two-year affair. This was also the time Wilde published his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a story about living for pleasure without remorse or concern for consequences. *The Importance of Being Earnest* premiered at London's St. James Theatre on February 14, 1895, running simultaneously on London stages with Wilde's equally acclaimed *An Ideal Husband*. Wilde himself said of *Earnest*: "It is exquisitely trivial, a delicate bubble of fancy, and it has its philosophy...that we should treat all trivial things of life seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality."

Douglas' father, the Marquis of Queensbury, who had a complicated relationship with his son, brought about Wilde's downfall. Queensbury did not approve of his son's and Wilde's relationship and attempted many times to disgrace Wilde publically. Wilde angrily filed a lawsuit against Queensbury for libel; Queensbury was acquitted, to the great expense of Wilde. Moreover, Wilde was arrested for sodomy and indecency. The first trial resulted in a hung jury, but the second resulted in a guilty verdict and Wilde was sentenced to prison for two years of hard labor.

Inside the prison, Wilde penned the essay *De Profundis*, in which he proclaimed, "I don't regret for a single moment having lived for pleasure. I did it to the full, as one should do everything that one does. There was not pleasure I did not experience."

Wilde was released from prison in May 1897 and wrote *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* as a response to his indentured time. After his release from prison, he lived in poverty in France, Italy, Sicily, and Switzerland. In 1900 he died of cerebral meningitis in France after being received by the Roman Catholic Church. It can be said that he was victimized by an age that was intolerant of him.

# Victorian England

## The emergence of *Earnest's* middle class

In a period distinguished by etiquette and social customs, Oscar Wilde wrote his masterful *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). Playing upon the rigid strictures of Victorian classes, Wilde's *Earnest* exposes the superficiality of Victorian society, making fun of its people and their customs. He reveals the hypocrisy of the leisured classes, especially scrutinizing those who shunned him.

The Victorian Era (1837-1901) saw the mercantile blossoming of the British Empire. England's consequent wealth and population boom (a near doubling) precipitated changes within its class system. Class was the chief societal divisor. In a literal sense, London's wealthy lived in the West End or perhaps in the suburbs, and its working classes lived in the proletarian East End. It is estimated that the aristocracy and the upper classes accounted for two percent of the population, while the working classes accounted for 79%. The remaining 19% was a rather amorphous "middle class" (a term that appeared with increasing frequency), newly invigorated by enterprises associated with the empire's growth and occupying a less defined space within the English social body. The activities of that middle class, therefore, revolved around self-definition in an attempt to clarify where exactly one fit into the society, domestically and professionally. Because *self*-definition often involved establishing who one is *not*, this middle-class surge resulted in manufactured social clashes and the urge to stubbornly display the life that was available to *us* and not to *them*.

Current historiography has cast this middle class as the heart of Victorian society. In the middle class, one can find the full spectrum of dominant social movements. It pushed for reforming the class system (questioning the moral integrity of both the aristocracy and the proletariat) as well as enshrining its own prestige. In its ambition to thrive, it created more work opportunities for itself, ornamented its surroundings with parks, facilities for mental enhancement, and clubs for leisure activities.

The middle class contained a gradation of prosperity within itself. The upper-middle class (the group of Lady Bracknell, Algernon, and Jack) consisted of industrialists, lawyers, doctors, clergy, headmasters, and some theater managers/owners (Arthur Sullivan and William Schwenk Gilbert made fortunes from their shows and received knighthoods). Many members of this class bought their way into their positions through memberships to clubs, land ownership and political affiliations.

As a member of the upper-middle class, much of one's activity followed from the desire to elevate oneself as high as possible and to establish a social network that disallowed the entry of the lesser middle-class peoples. Social lists like *Who's Who* (first published in 1849) and *Burkes Landed Gentry* (first published in 1836) informed the social elite of whom it was important to identify and associate.

This elitism and emphasis on social strictures has become especially associated with England's upper-middle class women (perhaps in no small part because of *Earnest's* and more particularly Bracknell's popularity). Strict guidelines from women of manners like Mrs. Humphry and Lady Collin Campbell dictated the moral etiquette of the Victorian Age. A woman took the art of being a proper lady very seriously, playing the part of the Victorian woman and helping those around her adhere to the guidelines that she, and the etiquette journals, deemed appropriate.

Maintaining the supposedly "determined order"—which was actually being fashioned and re-fashioned as time went on—fueled England's upper-middle class to perform at its highest caliber. This group, whose lifestyle and reputations were constantly on display, was forced to conceal their private lives (if they had one) in hopes that there might be no consequences. For Wilde, whose private life, once made public, caused him great grief, *Earnest* was a way to express his frustration with the people of his class, safely and publicly. *Earnest*, then, attacks—both lovingly and viciously—the obsession with the public presentation of the self that formed the core of middle-class, Victorian England.

## Who is Bunburying Today?

**Who:** Eliot Spitzer, New York Governor

**What:** Discovered using the services of high-priced prostitutes.

**Aliases:** Client 9; George Fox

**How he was found out:** Federal wire-tapping after North Fork Bank reported suspicious transactions to the IRS.

**Results:** Resigned as Governor on March 17, 2008. Hosting a new TV show on CNN about politics. Lost Super-Delegate status with the Democratic Party.

Through federal wiretap, Gov. Spitzer was caught arranging a meeting with a high-end prostitute in Washington D.C. He booked a hotel room at the Mayflower Hotel under the name George Fox (later revealed as the name of a close friend and hedge fund investor), and paid for everything for the lady's services, including cab fare, tickets, and room service.

The *New York Times* reported:

The wiretap recording, made during an investigation of a prostitution ring called Emperors Club VIP, captured a man identified as Client 9 on a telephone call confirming plans to have a woman travel from New York to Washington, where he had reserved a room. Mr. Spitzer was identified as Client 9.

The governor learned that he had been implicated in the prostitution probe when a federal official contacted his staff last Friday.

The governor informed his top aides of his involvement. He canceled his public events and scheduled an announcement after inquiries from the *Times*.

The man described as Client 9 in court papers arranged to meet with a prostitute who was part of the ring, Emperors Club VIP, on the night of Feb. 13. Mr. Spitzer traveled to Washington that evening, according to a person told of his travel arrangements.

It was later revealed that he had been frequenting prostitutes and the Emperor's Club (the high-end prostitution business) for several years. And what did Spitzer have to say for himself once caught?

"I have acted in a way that violates my obligation to my family and violates my or any sense of right or wrong," said Mr. Spitzer, who appeared with his wife Silda at his Manhattan office. "I apologize first and most importantly to my family. I apologize to the public to whom I promised better.

"I have disappointed and failed to live up to the standard I expected of myself. I must now dedicate some time to regain the trust of my family."

Spitzer resigned his post as governor on March 17, 2008. He is now appearing in his own political TV show on CNN.

## Wilde's Final Play, Opening Night & Closing

A snapshot of Victorian theater and Wilde's position in it

In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century theater was booming, and not only for the upper classes. Beginning to focus on drawing in the growing working class, theaters programmed some works based on everyday London life—stories with which a broader audience could identify. With rising population, the London transport system matured, and the city's theaters took advantage of this increased mobility. Busing these mostly illiterate patrons in from the city's surrounding areas, London's working classes wanted to be entertained by the day's popular farces, melodramas, society dramas, and some French dramas. England's theater-going population was never without a performance to attend, usually averaging seventeen visits per year.

In July of 1894, Wilde wrote a letter to George Alexander, actor-manager of the St. James Theatre, offering a new three act, untitled play, which Wilde offered for £150. In the first draft of *Earnest*, the names were completely different (Algernon Moncrief is Lord Alfred Rufford, Lady Bracknell is the Duchess of Selby, and perhaps most shockingly that imaginary brother is called George, not Earnest at all—depriving the play of its essential pun.) But if the characters and situations were not fully formed in this version, there are elements of the plot that remained through the final *Earnest*.

While writing the play on holiday, Wilde wrote to his lover Alfred Douglas that his play "is really very funny: I am quite delighted with it, but it is not shaped yet." Through some maneuvering, Wilde wrote to Alexander, stating that the initial letter/contract, which provided Alexander with the rights to the play in London and America and approved casting Alexander as Jack, had been lost. In retaining sole propriety of the play, Wilde could sell the show to an American producer himself for much more money than going through a producer like Alexander, which is exactly what he did (in April 1895, *Earnest* had its American premiere in New York City at the Empire Theatre). In various drafts of *Earnest*, the play—then labeled *Lady Lancing* to conceal the real title which Wilde had by then determined—ended up being four acts long. Alexander was adamantly opposed to this, demanding that Wilde cut the script to three acts, preferably eliminating one particular scene. Wilde contested this, as by Wilde's biographer Hesketh Pearson:

**Oscar Wilde.** Do you realize, Alex, what you are asking me to sacrifice?

**George Alexander.** You will be able to use it in another play.

**OW.** It may not fit into another play.

**GA.** What does that matter? You are clever enough to think of a hundred things just as good.

**OW.** Of course I am...a thousand if need be...but that is not the point. This scene that you feel is superfluous cost me terrible exhausting labour and heart-rending nerve-racking strain. You may not believe me, but I assure you on my honour that it must have taken fully five minutes to write.

Alexander's insistence on other cuts in the script resulted in his character, Jack, receiving much more dialogue and stage time, thus making his strife more central to the plot. When finally in rehearsals for the production, Wilde was courteous to everyone involved, but it has been recorded that he was also very interruptive, resulting in Wilde being asked to leave rehearsals by Alexander so they could fully run a scene.

*The Importance of Being Earnest* opened at the St. James Theatre in February 14, 1895. The night was severely cold; a snowstorm bitterly swept through London. Wilde's close friend Ada Leveson called the evening, "The Last First Night." Wilde's popularity is apparent in Leveson's account:

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 arrivals 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, who afterwards joined friends with the author himself when behind the scenes.... I can

see Oscar now as he looked on the 14<sup>th</sup> February 1895. He was dressed with elaborate dandyism and a sort of florid sobriety. His coat had a black velvet collar. He held white gloves in his small pointed hands. On one finger he wore a large scarab ring. A green carnation [a code for homosexuality], echo in colour of the erring, ribbon watch-chain hung from his white waistcoat. This costume, which on another man might have appeared perilously like fancy dress, and on his imitators was nothing less, seemed to suit him perfectly; he seemed at ease and to have the look of the last gentleman in Europe.

The interior of the St. James was adorned with etchings and engravings. The audience was mixed with upper, middle, and lower classes, although segregated within the theater itself. Charles Booth, author of *Labour and Life of the People*, explained that the "England theatre-goers are a special class, those who care, go often; the rest seldom or not at all."

The patrons of the St. James's opening nights all knew one another. An opening was something like a party. Women were adorned with flowers and puffy sleeves; men dressed dapperly in white gloves with ebony canes. And once the fashionably late had arrived at the theater, the curtain rose at 8:40 pm.

After the show, Wilde ran to Alexander's dressing room. With the small rivalry and issues in rehearsals with Wilde's inability to set the text, Wilde jested to Alexander, "My dear Aleck, it was charming, quite charming. And, do you know, from time to time I was reminded of a play I once wrote myself called *The Importance of Being Earnest*."

The play received near fifty reviews and notices, all favorable.

In private life, Wilde's secret relationship with Alfred Douglas was beginning to become much more public. A few days after the opening of *Earnest*, Douglas's father, the Marquis of Queensbury, left his calling card for Wilde at The Albemarle Club, having inscribed it, "For Oscar Wilde posing sodomite [*sic*]." Wilde charged Queensbury with libel, but was himself convicted of and imprisoned for "gross indecency", Wilde's productions came to a halt. After his arrest, *Earnest* was withdrawn from the St. James on May 8; *An Ideal Husband* (running at Wyndham's Criterion at the same time as *Earnest*) closed on May 27. In the weeks between his arrest and the plays' closings, Wilde's name had been withheld from the programs of both *An Ideal Husband* and *Earnest*, and the American premiere of *Earnest* at the Empire in New York ran for only a week with Wilde's name in very small type.

It would be some years later that Wilde's plays would be produced in America or London.

## Wilde as Irishman

### The colonial "double life": Irish and English

Irish identity-formation has been a process of "negotiation and exchange" in relation to the elephant across the sea, England. As Declan Kiberd, author of *Inventing Ireland*, writes, "Ireland was pressed into service as a foil to set off English virtues, as a laboratory in which to conduct experiments, and as a fantasy-land in which to meet fairies and monsters." England and Ireland helped define each other. This notion has interesting repercussions when applied to double lives. Kiberd writes:

Wilde's entire literary career constituted an ironic comment on the tendency of Victorian Englishmen to attribute to the Irish those emotions which they had repressed within themselves. His essays on Ireland question the assumption that, just because the English are one thing, the Irish must be its opposite. The man who believed that a truth in art is that whose opposite is also true was quick to point out that every good man has an element of the woman in him, just as every sensitive Irishman must have a secret Englishman within himself—and *vice-versa*. With his sharp intelligence, Wilde saw that the image of the stage Irishman tells far more about English fears than Irish realities, just

as the “Irish joke” revealed less about Irishmen’s innate foolishness than about Englishmen’s persistent and poignant desire to say something funny. Wilde opted to say that something funny for them in a lifelong performance of “Englishness” which was really a parody of the very notion. The ease with which Wilde effected the transition from stage-Ireland to stage-England was his ultimate comment on the shallowness of such categories. Earnest intellectuals back in Dublin missed this element of parody and saw in Wilde’s career an act of national apostasy: but he did not lack defenders. Yeats saw Wilde’s snobbery not as such, but as the clever strategy of an Irishman marooned in London, whose only weapon against Anglo-Saxon prejudice was to become more English than the English themselves, thereby challenging many time-honoured myths about the Irish.

The costs of such a gamble, however, might be too high, entailing a massive suppression of personality. In rejecting the stage-Irish mask, Wilde took a step towards selfhood, but in exchanging it for the pose of the urbane Englishman, he seemed merely to have exchanged one mask for another, and to have given rise to the suspicion that what these masks hid was no face at all—that the exponent of “personality” was fatally lacking in “character.” To his mortification and intermittent delight, Wilde found that his English mask was not by any means a perfect fit. The more he suppressed his inherited personality, the more it seemed to assert itself. “the two great turning-points of my life,” he wrote in *De Profundis*, “were when my father sent me to Oxford and when society sent me to prison.” It was a revealing equation, for in both institutions he learned what it was to be an outsider, and uninvited guest, and Irishman in England.

...

Wilde was the first major artist to discredit the romantic ideal of sincerity and to replace it with the darker imperative of authenticity: he saw that in being true to a single self, a sincere man may be false to half a dozen other selves. Those Victorians who saluted a man as having “character” were, in Wilde’s judgement, simply indicating the predictability of his devotion to a single self-image. The Puritan distrust of play-acting and the rise of romantic poetry had simply augmented this commitment to the ideal of a unitary self.... [Wilde] mocked the drab black suit worn by the Victorian male—Marx called it a social hieroglyphic—as a sign of the stable, imperial self. He, on the contrary, was interested in the subversive potential of a theatricality which caused people to forget their assigned place and to assert the plasticity of social conditions. Wilde wrote from the perspective of one who sees that the only real fool is the conventionally “sincere” man who fails to see that he, too, is wearing a mask, the mask of sincerity. If all art must contain the essential criticism of its prevailing codes, for Wilde an authentic life must recognize all that is most opposed to it.

From “Oscar Wilde – The Artist as Irishman” in *Inventing Ireland* (Harvard University Press, 1995).

**Declan Kiberd** is a professor in the Department of English at University College, Dublin. His many books on Irish literature and culture include *Synge and the Irish Language*, *Inventing Ireland*, *Irish Classics*, and *Ulysses and Us*.

# Glossary

## The Albany

A fashionable townhouse apartment building for bachelors in central London, near Piccadilly.

*"Mr. Earnest Worthing, B.4, The Albany."* (Algernon, Act I)

## Anabaptists

Members of a religious denomination that believed in adult baptism.

*"They savour of the heretical views of the Anabaptists..."* (Dr. Chasuble, Act III)

## Australia

The continent once used as an exile for English convicts, seen as a place for the reformation or punishment of scapegoats.

*"Uncle Jack is sending you to Australia."* (Cecily, Act II)

## Canonical practice

Religious law.

*"The sprinkling, and, indeed, the immersion of adults is a perfectly canonical practice."* (Dr. Chasuble, Act II)

## Court Guide

A yearly publication which lists the names and London addresses of the British royalty, aristocracy, and gentry.

*"I have carefully preserved the Court Guides of the period."* (Jack, Act III)

## Dog-cart

A small, two-wheeled, horse-drawn cart with a box for carrying dogs, originally used for hunting.

*"Merriman, order the dog-cart at once."* (Jack, Act II)

## Egeria

A nymph in Roman mythology who taught King Numa Pompilius the principles preserved in the city's laws; associated with Diana and chastity.

*"But I must not disturb Egeria with her pupil any longer."* (Dr. Chasuble, Act II)

## The Empire

The Empire Theatre of Varieties was a music hall in Leicester Square.

*"Well, we might trot round to the Empire at ten?"* (Algernon, Act I)

## Fifeshire, N.B.

Fife, Scotland is here called by a British form of address, Fifeshire, North Britain. This shows Jack's British insensitivity toward Scotland.

*"Miss Cardew is the granddaughter of the late Mr. Thomas Cardew of 149, Belgrave Square, S.W.; Gervase Park, Dorking, Surrey; and the Sporrán, Fifeshire, N.B."* (Jack, Act III)

## French Drama

The plays of French dramatists were popular in Victorian England, but often had to be censored due to their frank treatment of sexual matters.

*"That, my dear young friend, is the theory that the corrupt French Drama has been propounding for the last fifty years."* (Jack, Act I)

## Funds

Government stocks, similar to U.S. savings bonds. They yielded an unspectacular but dependable income.

*"Oh! About a hundred and thirty thousand pounds in the Funds."* (Jack, Act III)

## Gorgon

A monster from Greek mythology with snakes for hair. She was so ugly that the sight of her turned the viewer to stone.

*"Never met such a Gorgon..."* (Jack, Act I)

## Grand Hotel

The Grand Hotel in the Boulevard des Capucines was one of the most luxurious in Paris.

*"I had a telegram last night from the manager of the Grand Hotel."* (Jack, Act II)

## India

The Indian subcontinent was under British rule from 1858 to 1947; Queen Victoria was proclaimed Empress of India in 1876.

*"He was eccentric, I admit. But only in later years. And that was the result of the Indian climate..."* (Lady Bracknell, Act III)

## Letitia

Woman's name originating in Latin and meaning joy or happiness.

*"Egeria? My name is Letitia, Doctor."* (Miss Prism, Act II)

### **Liberal Unionist**

The Liberals and the Unionists were opposing political parties.

*"I am a Liberal Unionist."* (Jack, Act I)

### **Maréchal Niel**

A yellow rose, introduced to England in the 1860s.

*"A Maréchal Niel?" "No, I'd sooner have a pink rose."*  
(Cecily and Algernon, Act II)

### **Morning Post**

A newspaper and source of society's gossip, preferred for announcing engagements and marriages and viewed as a more appropriate place than the *London Times*.

*"The announcement will appear in the Morning Post on Saturday at the latest."* (Gwendolen, Act II)

### **Of age**

According to British society, the marriageable age was 18, but a young person did not legally come "of age" until 21.

*"Well, it will not be very long before you are of age and free from the restraints of tutelage."* (Lady Bracknell, Act III)

### **Oxonian**

An alumnus of Oxford University.

*"Untruthful! My nephew Algernon? Impossible! He is an Oxonian."* (Lady Bracknell, Act III)

### **Perrier-Jouet**

An expensive champagne.

*"Under an assumed name he drank...an entire pint bottle of my Perrier-Jouet, Brut, '89...."*  
(Jack, Act III)

### **Primitive Church**

The early Christian church.

*"The precept as well as the practice of the Primitive Church was distinctly against marriage."* (Dr. Chasuble, Act II)

### **Quixotic**

Foolishly impractical; derived from the character Don Quixote.

*"It is rather Quixotic of you."* (Cecily, Act II)

### **Rupee**

The Indian coin that had fluctuated in value since 1873.

*"The chapter on the Fall of the Rupee you may omit. It is somewhat too sensational."* (Miss Prism, Act II)

### **Scotland Yard**

Headquarters for London's police force.

*"I have been writing frantic letters to Scotland Yard about it."* (Jack, Act I)

### **Three-volume novel**

A standard form of British fiction in the nineteenth century, sustained by circulating libraries but criticized for its expense and the pressure it placed on writers to "pad" their novels. By 1895 it had become old-fashioned.

*"I believe that Memory is responsible for nearly all the three-volume novels that the circulating library sends to us."* (Cecily, Act II)

### **Tunbridge Wells**

Tunbridge Wells, Kent; a fashionable inland resort.

*"Charming old lady she is, too. Lives at Tunbridge Wells."* (Jack, Act I)

### **University Extension Scheme**

Lectures and classes offered to the public without enrolling in the University.

*"...under the impression that she is attending a more than usually lengthy lecture by the University Extension Scheme on the Influence of a permanent income on Thought."* (Lady Bracknell, Act III)

### **Wagnerian manner**

Richard Wagner's operas were thought by some in Victorian England to be too loud and overpowering.

*"Only relatives, or creditors, ever ring in that Wagnerian manner."* (Algernon, Act I)

### **Willis's**

A fashionable restaurant near the St. James' Theatre, often frequented by Wilde.

*"...I wouldn't be able to dine with you at Willis's tonight..."* (Algernon, Act I)

be Carshalton instead of No Woman's Land." (*Daily Express*, 7 January 1953)

### Names in *The Importance of Being Earnest*

<b>John Worthing, J.P.</b>	A seaside resort in the south of England. The J.P. is an indication of Mr. Worthing's status as a local magistrate.
<b>Algernon Moncrieff</b>	The first name, from the Norman-French aristocracy, means "bearded, with whiskers, or moustachioed." The Scottish "Moncrieff" was a common name in church and law.
<b>Lane</b>	John Lane was a London publisher who co-founded Bodley Head Press in 1887. Wilde never got along with him—his status as servant is Wilde's literary revenge.
<b>Bracknell</b>	The country estate of Lord Alfred Douglas' mother (see Wilde's biography, page 3) was situated in this Berkshire village.
<b>Gwendolyn Fairfax</b>	Welsh name meaning white. Fairfax means fair hair.
<b>Cecily Cardew</b>	Saint Cecilia, martyred circa A.D. 177, was the patron saint of music. Cardew is the namesake of some of Wilde's friends.

From Joseph Donahue, *Oscar Wilde's "The Importance of Being Earnest": a Reconstructive Critical Edition of the Text of the First Production at St. James's Theatre, London, 1895*. Gerrards Cross: Smythe, 1995.

## Victorian Manners for Men and Women

Excerpts from Mrs. Humphrey's conduct book (1897)

### MANNERS FOR WOMEN

#### The Really Nice Girl

Can anything in the world be nicer than a really nice girl?... [The typical English girl] is usually healthy-minded, and therefore not given unduly to introspection. She is far too well occupied in enjoying herself—riding her bicycle, punting herself about on the river, playing tennis or golf, and making sunshine in her home—to have much time for profitless self-analysis. She reads often enough that the sex she belongs to is a mystery, a problem, and she is content to leave herself unsolved, like a difficult conundrum. She is bright, frank, good-natured, merry, modest, and simple.

#### The Well-bred Girl

One can almost invariably distinguish the well-bred girl at the first glance, whether she is walking, shopping, in an omnibus, descending from a carriage or a cab, or sauntering up and down in the Park. Though the fashionable manner inclines to a rather marked decisiveness and the fashionable voice to loudness, even harshness, there is a quiet self-possession about the gentlewoman, whether young or old, that marks her out from women of a lower class, whose manner is florid.

This is perhaps the best word to describe the lively gestures, the notice-attracting glance and the self-conscious air of the underbred, who continually appear to wish to impress their personality upon all they meet. Self-effacement is as much the rule of good manners in the street as it is in society. The well-bred woman goes quietly along, intent on her own business and regardless of the rest of the world, except in so far as to keep from intruding upon their personal rights.

### **Tact**

Tact is both innate and acquired. The root of the thing must be born with the possessor, or the soil will prove uncongenial. Years of mingling in good society are necessary to its full development, and though a delicate sense of what is due to others is of the very essence of tact, it is never quite perfect without a knowledge of the gentle art of snubbing.

### **Addresses**

A good address is among the desirable circumstances of our surroundings, and there is no harm whatever in describing our locality in the best possible fashion. But to hear some of the disagreeable remarks occasionally made in such cases, one might imagine it to be a piece of what is popularly known as "side." "I'm not going to do anything so idiotic as to address her at Something Street, Cavendish Square, when she really lives in a back street out of Marylebone High Street," is the sort of thing that ill-natured persons sometimes say. But ill-nature is always an enemy of good manners.

## **MANNERS FOR MEN**

### **The Company We Keep**

Unfortunately, many a good fellow has been driven to seek companionship with those beneath him by the very difficulty he experiences in getting on in society.... He must find amusement somewhere. It is only natural to youth to crave it. At first his taste is jarred by those inferior to him, and his fastidiousness offended by their manners. But, such is the fatal adaptability of human nature to what is bad for it, he soon becomes accustomed to all that he at first objected to, and even forgets that he had ever found anything disagreeable in it. His dress and carriage deteriorate, and he is well on his way downhill in life long before he realizes that he has quitted his own level, probably for ever.

### **Dining Out**

Dinner stands alone as an institution sacred to the highest rites of hospitality. To be invited is an honor to the young man who is just beginning his social life. To absent himself would be a gross rudeness, unless he could plead circumstances of a pressing nature....

When a young man is shown into the drawing-room, he at once goes up to his hostess, no matter whether there is any one he knows nearer to the door than the lady of the house. This is always a fixed rule, whether it be on the occasion of a call or visit, or on having been invited to a party of any kind. When he has been greeted by his hostess he looks round the room to see if there is anyone present whom he knows. If so, he goes up to the ladies first, if there are any of his acquaintance present, and afterwards greets the gentlemen. His host will probably have shaken hands with him immediately after his wife has done so. He will then be told what lady he is to take down to dinner, and be introduced to her, if he does not already know her. He must bow, not shake hands, and make small talk for her during the interval between his introduction and the announcement of dinner.

Here is his first real difficulty. To converse with a perfect stranger is always one of the initial social accomplishments to be learned, and it is not at all an easy thing at first. It needs practice.

By the way, a man must not at his very first dinner party expect to be given a pretty girl to take down. He may possibly be so fortunate, but those prizes are usually reserved for men of more experience in social life. The young man has probably been invited to make up the necessary number of men, and an unmarried lady of uncertain age or an elderly woman without much claim to consideration will probably fall to his share. However, there is this consolation, she will be excellent for practicing upon. He would not mind making small mistakes so much as if his partner were a young and charming girl.

### **Engagement and Marriage**

The old-fashioned rule that a man must approach the father of a girl before offering himself in marriage to her has now, to some extent, died out. At the same time it is considered dishonorable for any one to propose to a girl in the face of the decided disapprobation of her family. Clandestine courtship is also regarded as dishonorable, except in circumstances where the girl is unhappy or oppressed and needs a champion.... Should the lady accept the offer, the happy wooer must take the earliest opportunity of seeing her father, or, failing him,

her nearest friend, and begging him to permit the engagement. Should he consent, all is well; but in the contrary case, his decision must be accepted. To allow a girl to engage herself against the wish of her family is to drag her into a false position....

Such trifles as wealth and ease may appear as naught to the mind of the youthful lover, not to be weighed for a moment in the balance with love and young romance. The girl, too, may be of the same way of thinking at the time, but it the more behoves the man, the stronger, to consider her and to remember that poverty is such a bitter and a cruel thing that it even kills love at times.

### **Lies**

Occasionally it happens that a young man finds himself "dropped" by some family with whom he has been on terms of intimacy. He is debarred by the rules of polite society from asking for an explanation, it being a canon of good breeding never to ask questions that are embarrassing to reply to. This has been embodied in a very outspoken and unceremonious phrase "you ask me no questions, I tell you no lies." There is a deep truth in it, nevertheless, and even in family life it is well to observe it.

### **Manner**

Were I asked to give a recipe for the formation of a good manner I should recommend an equal mixture of self-confidence and humility as the first essential, then a considerable desire to please, tempered by the self-respect which reserves from officiousness and that annoying air of "ingratiating" themselves that some men assume in society. There must be perfect self-possession, though in the very young this is scarcely expected, a little becoming shyness sitting very well upon them.

While self-possession has been acquired it is well to add on to it the saving grace of gentleness. This quality is much misunderstood by men. In women they adore it; in themselves and each other they undervalue it. The man of perfect manners is he who is calmly courteous in all circumstances, as attentive outwardly to the plain and the elderly as he is to the young and pretty.

### **The Calling Cards**

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, calling cards became an established ritual of the upper class, creating a series of ways for introductions, invitations, and visits to be arranged, and for social circles to expand.

The calling card was a simple card with one's name, title, house or district or address, and a lady's reception day (as women were designated at-home days to receive callers). The hours of calling are from four to seven in the afternoon, but young men who are on very intimate terms with the family should carefully abstain from calling after six o'clock, lest they should be the last and solitary caller.

Once accepted into the house for a call, the man holds his hat and glove in the left hand, greets his hostess first, she shaking hands with him, and then he looks round the room and greets any acquaintance he may recognise, going up to them if he knows them well, bowing if his previous knowledge of them has been slight. Having taken his seat, he still holds his hat in his hand, and he must find small talk as best he can, for sitting silent is awkward for him and distressing to his hostess. The reason for carrying the hat to the drawing-room is a somewhat subtle one. It is based on the supposition that the masculine caller feels himself privileged in being permitted to pay his respects, and feeling himself on sufferance is ready to leave in a moment, hat in hand, should he not find his presence agreeable and acceptable.

## Who is Bunburying Today?

**Who:** Evan Ratliff, reporter at *Wired* magazine

**What:** Attempted to shed his identity and adopt another one, the tongue-in-cheek, J.D. Gatz – a test to see how hard disappearing is in the digital age

**How he was found out:** *Wired* launched a contest (with a \$5000 prize, \$3000 of which came out of Ratliff's own pocket) challenging readers to identify Ratliff's whereabouts, catch him off-guard, and mention the codename "fluke." A cross-nation team of digital vigilante's managed to track him with the help of a local restaurateur.

When he was finally caught in New Orleans, Louisiana, Ratliff was initially angry. But then he realized that he would soon be returning to *his* life.

I was angry: at myself for getting caught and losing the money, at *Wired* for tempting me with the challenges. But that was soon replaced by the thrill of being redeposited in my own identity, with a family, a partner, friends, and a past I didn't have to hide. I packed up my apartment, rented a car, and visited my parents in Florida. Then I bought a plane ticket home.

... I'd discovered how quickly the vision of total reinvention can dissolve into its lonely, mundane reality. Whatever reason you might have for discarding your old self and the people who went with it, you'll need more than a made-up backstory and a belt full of cash to replace them.

Ratliff dodged being found for almost a month. But shedding his life was emotionally taxing; he was lonely and filled with fear of being caught.

By the end of the first week, the deception had already begun to wear me down. Lying about your identity involves more than just transgressing some abstract prohibition against deceit. It means overcoming a lifetime of built-up habits, from a well-rehearsed life story to the sound of your own name.

The gnawing flaw in the idyllic life of J. D. Gatz [Ratliff's alias] was that I did all of these activities alone. It wasn't just that I had no friends. It was that the interactions I did have were beyond superficial. They were fake.... I'd always prided myself on being comfortable with solitude, but this wasn't normal solitude. It was everyone-is-out-to-get-me isolation.

To read the full story of Ratliff's adventure, visit [http://www.wired.com/vanish/2009/11/ff\\_vanish2/](http://www.wired.com/vanish/2009/11/ff_vanish2/).