

The Importance of Being Married: Lady Bracknell as Marriage Market Mamma in Oscar Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest

Svetlana Bochman

► **To cite this version:**

Svetlana Bochman. The Importance of Being Married: Lady Bracknell as Marriage Market Mamma in Oscar Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest. *Alizés : Revue angliciste de La Réunion, Faculté des Lettres et Sciences humaines (Université de La Réunion)*, 2011, Straddled Borders, pp.70-78. hal-02340737

HAL Id: hal-02340737

<https://hal.univ-reunion.fr/hal-02340737>

Submitted on 31 Oct 2019

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING MARRIED: LADY BRACKNELL AS MARRIAGE MARKET MAMMÀ IN OSCAR WILDE'S *THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST*

During Oscar Wilde's era, having a child make a wealthy marriage was the most rapid means by which a middle-aged wife could rise up the socio-economic ladder; such mothers played an important role in the late nineteenth-century marriage market, creating social phenomena I call the "marriage market mammà," the type of marriage-obsessed mother satirized by Wilde in his depiction of Lady Bracknell in *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). Wilde is well-known for his modes of subversive humor and for the themes he employs to satirize mercenary marriage. One of these themes is his dark vision of the marriage market, especially apparent in *Earnest* where he writes about marriage with outspoken cynicism and a dash of black humor, revealing a gloomy view of human motives. And though a number of studies have been written on the nineteenth-century marriage market and considerable scholarly attention has been paid to *Earnest*, I believe there is room for further study of Wilde's view of the market, specifically as it relates to motherhood. Critically the theme of the marriage market has been examined to a much lesser degree in Wilde, however much has been written on the author himself.¹³ Wilde satirizes mercenary alliances while critiquing the society which allows and encourages them; in this essay I will first concentrate on his presentation of the marriage market, then explore his motives for satire and critique. In Wilde, it is not possible for a well-disposed character to marry for money because Wilde does not see marriage as a desirable social enterprise and therefore has much less tolerance for mercenary marriage of any kind – and yet, there is an implicit dialogue between the manner by which the author treats mercenary marriage

¹³ One reason Wilde opposed the institution of marriage was because he was homosexual. For a treatment of homosexuality in his work, see Weeks, among many others and for a discussion of strong female figures in Wilde's writing, see Sammells and Powell. For models of drama criticism dealing with audience acceptance or resistance when reading Wilde see Raby, Powell and Gagnier. See Cohen for a discussion of comedy in *Earnest*, Ellmann for Wilde's biography and Marcus on Victorian marriage.

satirically and the grim reality of women's tenuous financial and social situation in the late nineteenth century. The play is meant to jar readers into contemplating the cruelty of the market: if young women are pieces of flesh, desirable only for social ornamentation and producing an heir, men who are searching for a wife are seen by marriage market *mamá*s like Lady Bracknell as "meal tickets" for their daughters and a person's worth becomes defined by the marketplace.

In the character of Lady Bracknell, the marriage market *mamá* reaches her full power. Lady Bracknell becomes doubly involved with the marketplace, first securing a wealthy husband for herself, then for her daughter. This woman married above her station and therefore feels adept at marketing her daughter despite a lack of support from her husband – the play scarcely mentions Lord Bracknell, except when he is revealed as "a symbol of masculine passivity" (Pestka 190). This mother is meant to be an outrageous character;¹⁴ she is satirized and her efforts seem ineffectual at the end, but her social power makes her dangerous, because although late-Victorian audiences may have been discomposed by some of Wilde's epigrams, in *Lady Bracknell* they recognized a familiar society mother. Lady Bracknell's credentials are flawless with regard to class, wealth, and good name; her power is such that when accepting the orphaned Cecily and nameless Jack as part of her family (before Jack's identity is revealed), she knew that she could sway society to accept them as well. Though Wilde often ridicules Lady Bracknell, he does not present her as a powerless woman who lacks social graces and he does not create her as a social villain – he could not, for in Wilde's view, society had accepted Lady Bracknell and she could not be displaced from her position. As a marriage market *mamá*, she is not only concerned with promoting her daughter's interests but her own as well. This woman is ready to apply herself considerably in order to see her daughter married; she is an aristocratic, sophisticated person who is cognizant of the methods by which to navigate society and is adept at the rules of the marriage market, knowing how to attract suitors for her daughter and successfully manipulate those around her, necessary skills if one is to best present one's daughter and family on the market. In addition, she ex-

¹⁴ See Powell for a description of contemporary audience reactions to Wilde's characters.

hibits hypocrisy regarding marriage, aspiring high socially for her daughter although her own husband “married down” in choosing her for a wife.

Although Lady Bracknell is the pinnacle of propriety, Wilde’s late-Victorian society matron is insidious, for though she asserts that she disapproves of “mercenary marriages,” she made an excellent alliance, perhaps with the help of her mother, when she was a young woman with “no fortune of any kind” (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 374) and once established socially through class, wealth, and good name, she became a matriarch in a patriarchal society. Now that she desires to make equally worthy alliances for her daughter Gwendolyn and nephew Algernon, she creates a list of potential suitors for her daughter that coincides with that of her dowager friend; between them, the ladies cover the market of eligible men, an action which caused Ellmann to notice the way Wilde “laughs at arranged marriages and all the prudential considerations entailed by them” (Ellmann: 1982 xvii). Lady Bracknell scorns Jack and Cecily as potential mates for Gwendolyn and Algernon, believing them both lacking in “birth” and Cecily also lacking in wealth, although Algernon himself is deeply in debt; she hypocritically refuses to consider the orphaned Cecily as a wife for Algernon until she discovers Cecily to be affluent – then she makes certain that the young woman understands that Algernon is insolvent. Lady Bracknell is quite cynical regarding all aspects of marriage – its beginning, maturity, and ending; with regard to beginning an attachment, she asserts: “I am not in favor of long engagements. They give people the opportunity of finding out each other’s character before marriage, which I think is never advisable” (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 375). She refers to her own husband with derision, claiming she has “never undeceived him on any question” (Quoted in Pestka 463) and when a friend is widowed, Lady Bracknell remarks: “I never saw a woman so altered. She looks quite twenty years younger” (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 328). Thus, Wilde employs Lady Bracknell, who represents all that is supposedly strong and ineradicable in late nineteenth-century society, to reveal the inconsequence of courtship and marriage: as a “confirmed follower of social decorum” (Pestka 176), she is also “a confirmed follower of a Philistine morality” (185). Through her, he demonstrates the emptiness of upper-class marriage procedures, because according to Wilde, it is hypocriti-

cal to speak about the ideals of marriage when in reality one has married for financial gain.

Nevertheless, although he satirizes both Lady Bracknell and the society she represents, setting both as antagonists to the young people in the play, Wilde acknowledges the formidable nature of both the woman and the prevailing social order. He appears to condone the marriages of the two young couples in *Earnest*, who give the impression of rebelling against convention in acting to please themselves, portraying a different kind of “earnestness” than socially sanctioned. Yet at the end, although in their unions Jack/Ernest, Gwendolyn, Algernon, and Cecily seem to prevail over oppressive social minutiae and the woman who represents them, Lady Bracknell is not by any means vanquished – for one thing, she is pleased by Algernon’s marriage to an heiress. Jack appears to thwart her plans when he compels her to concede to his marriage to Gwendolyn before he will allow his ward Cecily to wed Algernon, but Algernon’s wealthy marriage more than compensates for any damage done to the Bracknell family name through Gwendolyn’s marriage to the “nameless” Jack. Wilde then reveals that Gwendolyn has married a gentleman of “good name” and connections after all, when Jack is discovered to be Lady Bracknell’s own nephew Ernest; Wilde twists the plot so that the young people’s wishes equal Lady Bracknell’s materialistic desires, proving that he sees this matriarch’s character as an unavoidable social reality and demonstrating the sinister means by which the marriage market mammá’s wishes become imposed on the young people without their knowledge. Therefore it is possible that Algernon’s sudden “love” for Cecily begins when he realizes she is wealthy and it is ironic that although Algernon despises all that his Aunt Augusta stands for, like her, he also makes a mercenary marriage, turning Lady Bracknell’s, and through her, society’s “concession” to the younger and more unconventional generation into no concession at all.

Through studying Wilde’s text, we can see not only the manner in which British marriage satire functioned in the late nineteenth century, but also how societal views of marriage stood during this period; by critiquing how Wilde approached gender and sexuality through humor when writing about mercenary marriage, one can trace these social views and in doing so, one can

see possibilities for re-contextualizing current readings of the play. In particular, several historical transformations relating to marriage occurred in the nineteenth century: the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 (a.k.a. the Divorce Law) allowed for more easily obtained divorces when divorce cases were moved from ecclesiastical to civil courts and marriage became based upon contract rather than sacrament and the Married Woman's Property Act of 1870, which allowed women to retain their earnings and to inherit property. This Act made it possible for the first time for married women living apart from their husbands to support themselves and their children, because prior to this period, a woman became "one body" with her husband upon marriage and lacked custody of her own children or property, or as Ellmann points out: "...when the husband and wife exchanged vows, they became one person, and, in the words of the jurist William Blackstone, 'the husband is that person'" (Ellmann: 1988 184).¹⁵ The cavalier manner with which Wilde refers to divorce in *Earnest*. "divorces are made in heaven" (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 323), demonstrates how far late-Victorian society's notions of marriage had moved from the view of marriage as a permanent union. In *Earnest*, Wilde comments on what he believes to be the dissipated state of late nineteenth-century marriage through Algernon's glibness and Jack's more serious warning:

ALGERNON. If ever I get married, I'll certainly try to forget the fact.

JACK. ...The Divorce Court was specially invented for people whose memories are so curiously constituted. (*Ibid.*)

The conversation between the two bachelors is ironic since both marry by the play's conclusion and Wilde's cynical view presents marriage as inevitably resulting in unhappiness. It is interesting to note that *Earnest* is the only play Wilde wrote whose action revolves around courtship – his other plays all involve a married couple whose love and marriage are melodramatically tested, and yet *Earnest* opens with Lane, a servant, explaining the "demoralizing" effect of marriage: instead of marriage as a "mutual understand-

¹⁵ See Craig for several interesting studies on Victorian laws regarding betrothal and Nunokawa on property ownership and the treatment of women as commodities during the Victorian era.

ing,” Lane’s union is based on a *misunderstanding*. In an age when divorce was becoming more widespread, Wilde employs Lane to demonstrate that the bonds of marriage are fragile: Lane feels he cannot know much about being married – he has “only been married once” (321). Moreover, in addition to references to divorce, there are several allusions to adultery in *Earnest*, as when Algernon explains how he employs visits to his fictitious “friend” Bunbury as an excuse to escape social responsibility:

ALGERNON. A man who marries without knowing Bunbury has a very tedious time of it.

JACK. That is nonsense. If I marry a charming girl...I certainly won't want to know Bunbury.

ALGERNON. Then your wife will... in married life three is company and two is none. (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 327)

Although Jack asserts that he will be faithful to his bride and therefore have little need for Bunbury, Algernon predicts that one partner in a marriage will inevitably commit adultery, and while nineteenth-century ideals praised honesty within marriage, Wilde believes that marriage “makes a life of deception absolutely necessary for both parties” (Ellmann: 1982 20). For example, as Ellmann points out, “Deception is everywhere [in *Earnest*], cancelled by spontaneity and humor” (Ellmann: 1988 423) as when Cecily and Gwendolyn are willingly deceived into marrying their “ideal” mate (one named Ernest) and Jack and Algernon consent to be christened “Ernest” in order to succeed with the women and are rewarded for their deception.

In conclusion, Wilde’s negative views of marriage, particularly mercenary marriage, reveal a great deal about the manner in which he sees marriage’s social role: Wilde does not take marriage seriously and sees no redeeming value in it; he demonstrates that embracing social values through wedlock can be destructive to the individual because one must sometimes sacrifice personal happiness in marriage. His plays make numerous derogatory comments on the subject and he appears to consider marriage an empty institution, one whose reality is devoid of romantic ideals; therefore, there are no circumstances under which marrying for money is acceptable in Wilde; those who make mercenary marriages are fatuous hypocrites or liars

to be unmasked. In fact, he reveals that even non-mercenary matches are doomed, as when his young women often profess a disinterested desire to marry for love, yet characters like Cecily and Gwendolyn marry for the most frivolous of reasons, treating courtship and by implication marriage, as lightly as their dandy lovers, Jack and Algernon, who seem to wish to marry on a whim. Throughout *Earnest*, Wilde portrays Gwendolyn and Cecily holding unrealistic expectations regarding what an “ideal” husband should be, as when in explaining her expectations to Jack, Gwendolyn states “We live, as I hope you know, Mr. Worthing, in an age of ideals... and my ideal has always been to love someone of the name of Ernest” (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 337). What causes Gwendolyn’s assertion to appear comic is Wilde utilization of “the ironic device of deflation by comparison; the serious issue is equated with the trivial one, undercutting the significance of the former” (Pestka 178). “Ideals,” like that of finding a life-long mate, are juxtaposed with the trivial notion of loving a man named Ernest, which leads Pestka to notice that “In this case, the Philistine values are deflated... ideals in general become mere labels; in other words, the investment of moral value in accidental objects chosen arbitrarily by putting appropriate names on them” (ibid.) One reason Wilde so satirizes the ideals of marriage is because he sees these ideals as untruthful and in his comedies he exhibits the ways in which society overly-idealizes the qualities necessary in a marriage partner, resulting in unrealistic expectations from both husband and wife. Even the best marriages in his plays, those where the couple maintains that they had married for love, are supported by lies, and consequently, none of Wilde’s wits attempt to find an ideal mate, leading Bulger to notice that “the end-of-the century dandy, who is a sceptic in relation to everything, does not waste time searching for the ideal woman because he does not believe she exists” (Bulger). Far from viewing marriage as absolutely necessary for the maintenance of society, Wilde believes that marriage is given too high a place, constricting both men and women’s movements and suppressing individual freedom; Wilde critiques a culture so eager to maintain the *status quo* that it becomes inhuman. He views conforming to the conventions of society as a suppression of individuality and seems to regard marriage as one such convention, prompting his most witty characters to engage in superficial be-

havior and speech in order to promote individualism, speech consisting of statements such as “[t]he happiness of a married man depends on the people he has not married” (*A Woman of no Importance* 461). Far from lacking complete felicity until they marry the heroine, Wilde’s bachelors are generally his most contented characters, so that when Lane notices that unlike that of bachelors’ establishments, “in married households the champagne is rarely of a first-rate brand” (*The Importance of being Earnest* 321), the quality of champagne seems to symbolize a more general decline of pleasure after marriage. The author’s view of the individual’s social role stems from his view of marriage’s role in society: Wilde attacks his era’s social vices and follies *amorally*, without attempting to educate, and despite his cynicism, respects those who courageously retain individuality in a conformist society. Wilde feels one should attempt self-development and self-understanding despite social strictures; his wittiest characters – none are “positive” or “negative” – fail to conform to social strictures, even after marriage.

Dr. Svetlana Bochman¹⁶

¹⁶ 101 West 90 Street, #17C, New York, NY 1002, USA, (646) 641-1468
svetlanabochoyman@gmail.com.

WORKS CITED

- Bulger, Laura Fernanda, "The Importance of Being Fradique" (presentation, International Conference for Anglo-Portuguese Studies, Lisbon, Portugal, May 6, 2001).
- Ellmann, Richard, "Introduction," in *The Picture of Dorian Gray and Other Writings by Oscar Wilde* (New York: Bantam, 1982).
- Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Knopf, 1988).
- Pestka, Dariusz, "A Typology of Oscar Wilde's Comic Devices" *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia: An International Review of English Studies*. 22 (1989).
- Wilde, Oscar, "The Importance of Being Earnest," in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde: Stories, Plays, Poems and Essays*, edited by J. B. Foreman (New York: Perennial, 1989).
- , "A Woman of No Importance," in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde: Stories, Plays, Poems and Essays* edited by J. B. Foreman (New York: Perennial, 1989).
-