Wilde's *Earnest* & Other Plays

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The poems, though frequently narratives, do not depict what Hardy's novels are often concerned with, as Thornton and Small observe: "... that conflict between the social and moral which gives the fiction its energy. Hardy's subject is most fittingly described in the words of the title of an earlier volume [of tales]—life's little ironies." The concluding poem of Wessex Poems provoked Meredith, who wrote: "What induces Hardy to commit himself to verse!":

I look into my glass,
And view my wasting skin,
And say, "Would God it came to pass
My heart had shrunk as thin!"

The inclusion of Wessex Poems in the Woodstock reprints series reminds us that Hardy's anguished grasp of human isolation in an absurd cosmos aligns him with the proto-Modernists of the late nineteenth century.

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IN 1891, AFTER WRITING many poems, several essays, a few works of fiction and a novel, Wilde turned his full attention to the drama. That he should explore the medium of the theatre was more than a logical progression in his literary career. A supreme exponent of clever conversation, an experimenter with masks who courted publicity and who loved to hold court, he took naturally to playwriting: it allowed him a symbiotic interaction with an audience and a wonderful opportunity to exploit his talent for the dramatic in all things—to say little of a possible lucrative source of income.

During the eighties he first tried his hand at writing for the stage with Vera, or the Nihilist, a melodrama set in contemporary Russia; but it was a disappointment both to its audiences and author. Transparently a drama about a modern non-conforming woman and a quick-witted Prince who spouts epigrams, it had scant success when first produced in New York in 1883. In the same year of his first failure, he completed The Duchess of Padua, a revenge drama with echoes of Shakespeare, Webster, Shelley, and a half dozen more authors. It had a short run, under the title Guido Ferranti, once again in New York. Being a regular and discriminating playgoer with a close knowledge of the contemporary
theatre, Wilde soon realized that if he were to have the success he hoped for he had to forgo the political and the pastiche and try a modern polished comedy. About the same time that his second play was fading into obscurity, he was planning another work, *Lady Windermere's Fan*.

When *Lady Windermere's Fan* opened at London's St. James's Theatre on 22 February 1892, it proved a popular and critical success. The public loved this brilliant social comedy, especially its verbal wit and shocking paradoxes. Wilde's next play, *A Woman of No Importance*, followed in 1893. Once again, its audiences enjoyed a string of paradoxes and epigrams that, admittedly, slowed down the action but added to the sophistication and humor in which they had greater interest anyway. Wilde's third theatrical success came the following year, 1894, with *An Ideal Husband*, a dramatic discourse on marriage. Though actually it had less action and conflict than his previous hits, the play so pleased Shaw, who had recently been appointed drama critic for the *Saturday Review*, that he wrote: "In a sense Mr. Wilde is ... our only thorough playwright. He plays with everything, with wit, with philosophy ... with actors and audiences, with the whole theatre."

In 1895 still another play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, was received with rapturous acclaim. Wilde was now at the pinnacle of his career. His "trivial" comedy for "serious" people was hailed as one of the greatest farcical comedies in English. In the short span of four years Wilde had become one of the most admired and wealthy playwrights of the century. Actors and producers entreated him to write plays for them. Since it took him only about four weeks to draft a comedy and sprinkle it with epigrams, the future looked bright indeed. Paradoxically, the bromide about its being darkest before the dawn worked in reverse in Wilde's case. He had lived forty years and, according to friends, had never known an unhappy day; but something baneful was about to happen. His last five years of life were to be the most tragic and piteous in the whole history of British literature. On 25 May 1895 his meteoric rise to fame ended abruptly when he was convicted of gross immorality and sentenced to two years' hard labor.

In an introduction of some twenty-five pages, the editor of this volume sums up Wilde's life and evaluates his dramatic efforts. Wisely, and because of space limitations, Raby glosses over *Vera* and *Guido* and omits them from this collection. As would be expected, he includes *The Importance of Being Earnest* (as his title indicates), *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, *An Ideal Husband*, and *Salome*. Raby
also supplies a brief Note on the Texts, a Select Bibliography, a Chronology, and some sixty pages of Explanatory Notes. In short, there is material aplenty here for the average reader and considerable matter for the specialist.

The texts selected for this collection are, with a few minor emendations, those of the first published edition of each play; and in the case of *Salome*, originally written in French, the first English translation. Though Wilde contrived to appear insouciant toward his comedies, he supervised with determined effort the publication of each work (with the exception of *Salome*). Having the benefit of early productions to draw upon, he made numerous changes. The published versions are, obviously, substantially different from the acting versions. “I need not tell you . . .,” Wilde once commented, “how a play grows . . . and what new points one can produce.”

With an awareness of both visual and auditory matters, he incorporated many “new points” that developed during rehearsals, and he frequently cut and improved lines and speeches. Early drafts of various manuscripts, typescripts, and prompt-books offer a virtually indigestible trove for investigating Wilde’s complex process of development and revision. For those inclined to follow up on such sources, Raby recommends the New Mermaid editions of each comedy: *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, edited by Ian Small (1980); *The Importance of Being Earnest*, edited by Russell Jackson (1980); and *Two Society Comedies: A Woman of No Importance, An Ideal Husband*, edited by Ian Small and Russell Jackson (1983).

To his credit, Raby avoids duplicating much of the information on Wilde’s plays readily found elsewhere; but since *Salome* presents problems of a critical nature, he covers the work from his own vantage points. One could quibble with Raby’s views on *Salome* and with some of his annotations to the comedies found among his Explanatory Notes. Since he undoubtedly knows the material better than anyone else, however, his judgments invariably ring true. Convincingly, Raby refutes those who perversely denigrate Wilde’s plays as little more than frothy entertainments. “They are more than they appear to be,” he posits, “and they continue to appeal to late twentieth-century audiences in spite of largely obtuse commentaries of generations of theatre critics.”

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115