Mr. Bunbury, the Abandoned Manuscript, and a “true lover’s knot:” The Price of a Social Identity in Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*

“It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances,” claims Oscar Wilde, suggesting that the essence of individuals can be gathered through observing their outward appearances (*Dorian Gray* 16). This is reflected in his 1895 play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, in which identity is established through convincing performances which create an outward appearance of respectability endorsed by society. Kerry Powell writes extensively on this topic of performativity in Oscar Wilde’s works and argues that because Jack exists outside of society’s scripts for birth, marriage, and death, he does not have an identity until, through performativity, he becomes Ernest (103, 120). I agree and would argue that one result of constructing a performed social identity based on appearances and adherence to social expectations regarding birth, marriage, and death is the effacement or minimization of the individuality of the characters. All of the couples in *Earnest* get the same ending – engagement – but only after the unique and socially abnormal stories and situations which differentiate them from other characters have been resolved out of existence. Algy, Miss Prism, and Cecily, as well as Jack, each defy the social norms of birth, marriage, or death, which places them outside of society’s boundaries but generates audience interest in them as individuals. Eradicating their differences effaces their individuality but is also the way in which the characters bargain with society for a normalized identity based on adherence to social expectations. For the characters of Algy, Miss Prism, and Cecily in *Earnest*, the price of obtaining a place in society is giving up their individuality, a fact that suggests the power that identity can wield over individuality.

One of the major ideas about performativity in *The Importance of Being Earnest* which critics agree on is that social life is a performance rather than a truth. Powell introduces the idea
of social identity “as a performance, a repertoire of speech, gestures, and rituals that constitute a theatrical ‘act’” rather than as truth (102). Powell emphasizes that the place individuals occupy in society, or their authorized identity, is a result of how they perform the social scripts of birth, marriage, and death (102). Thus, it is not the essence of an individual but something created through the interactions of society’s expectations and that individual’s actions. Gregory Mackie observes that the authorized behavior of characters, or “codified decorum” as he calls it, consists merely of “rules of conduct or ‘outward signs’ that might not be anchored to an origin or ‘deep foundation’ in morals” (152). In other words, an individual’s socially authorized identity is based only on outward appearances seen by society, even if it is a fictitious performance. Because this inclusion in society is based on appearances, in Wilde’s comedies it is accessible to virtually any kind of outsider, provided they are adept, as Alan Sinfield observes, at “negotiating a partly permeable system” through “continual improvisation and compromise” (43). Thus, characters willing to compromise their individuality and shape their performance to appear in accordance with society’s scripts may construct a socially accepted identity.

This endorsement by society is essential to the performative construction of identity in Earnest. Writing about performativity, Sarah Balkin claims that “maximal endorsement of the fiction [of identity] is necessary in order to realize it,” or make it a reality (37). She further explains that it is only because the character of Ernest is communally endorsed that Jack’s performance can be made into reality when he becomes Ernest (40). It is the communal acceptance of the performance which gives the performance validity and the individual a social identity in the play. On the other hand, if the performance is not communally accepted (as is the case when social protocols are disregarded), the individual is denied an identity or identifiable place in society.
Despite the fact that communal acceptance is required for a social identity, throughout most of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Algy is identified by his individuality. This is demonstrated by his defiance of social norms, including his creation of an imaginary friend contrary to the dictates of society’s birth scripts. Algy creates a “permanent invalid friend” whom he names “Mr. Bunbury” (Wilde, *Earnest* 77). According to society’s rules for birth and name-giving, the parents choose a name which is bestowed by a clergyman through a proper christening. Algy’s Mr. Bunbury is never properly christened, which means that his name is not accepted by society. And because Mr. Bunbury is a mere figment of Algy’s imagination, he does not have a family by whom he can be socially identified. These abnormalities in Algy’s performance place Mr. Bunbury and Algy outside of society. But they also reflect Algy’s creativity and give him greater individuality.

Algy’s reaction to Bunbury’s death further contributes to his individuality and places him at odds with a social identity. To Lady Bracknell’s inquiries about Bunbury, he impulsively proclaims, “Oh! I killed Bunbury this afternoon. I mean poor Bunbury died this afternoon” (Wild, *Ernest* 131). Although he says that Bunbury’s doctors had told him he could not live any longer, the truth is that Algy no longer had a use for Bunbury and declared him out of existence by avowing him dead (131). Rather than follow society’s prescribed system, Algy, who does not have the authority of a doctor to determine whether someone is dead or alive, decides that Bunbury would be more of a problem alive than dead and professes him dead himself. According to the death protocol of society, after his friend had been declared dead by proper authority, Algy should have attended a funeral to appropriately mourn his friend’s death. However, rather than attending a funeral, he goes on holding Cecily’s hand and attempting to get permission to marry her (132). This shows a disregard for the solemn script of death; however, it also gives us a
glimpse into Algy as character who is impetuous, romantic, and disregarding of the rules. These characteristics and his disobedience to the social conventions of death further form Algy’s personality.

Algy yet again breaks society’s conventions of birth and family—while also developing his personality—by posing as Jack’s wild brother Ernest, whom he knows to be imaginary. While Jack is in town, Algy introduces himself at Jack’s country home as Jack’s brother, “‘Mr. Ernest Worthing, B. 4, The Albany, W.’” using Jack’s fictitious calling card (Wilde, *Earnest* 100). By introducing himself as Jack’s brother, Algy is claiming to have a sibling and a family who are not biologically or legally his. Society’s family traditions dictate that family is created by birth. Siblings cannot be spontaneously chosen by the other children in the family. Jack later accuses Algy of “disgraceful deception” and states that Algy was “perfectly aware from the first that I have no brother, that I never had a brother, and that I don’t intend to have a brother, not even of any kind” (136). Algy knows, as does Jack and society, that Jack is not his brother. Thus, not even the family he claims as his can sanction his identity as the man called Ernest. Breaking birth and family traditions in this manner portrays Algy as a creative and playful individual and creates more abnormalities which give him personality.

In the end, as the abnormalities that make him unique are normalized, Algy’s story of Mr. Bunbury is brought in line with society’s expectations through social acceptance of the stories he has told. The existence of Algy’s imaginary friend Mr. Bunbury is publicly denied, and this denial is accepted by Lady Bracknell, who is a representative of normalized society. When she says, “And now that we have finally got rid of this Mr. Bunbury,” Lady Bracknell expresses relief at Bunbury’s death and acceptance of his non-existence (Wilde, *Earnest* 131). This conversation reverses and effectively erases Algy’s prior story of his invalid friend, Mr.
Bunbury. When Bunbury has been erased from the story of Algy’s life, he is no longer in conflict with society’s scripts regarding birth and death but is normalized, at least as far as Bunbury is concerned.

This still leaves open the question of the fictitious Ernest; therefore, Algy’s posturing as Jack’s brother Ernest must also be re-written in a socially upheld manner. This is done through his exposure by his cousin Gwendolen and by Lady Bracknell’s identification of Jack’s actual brother. In the garden at Jack’s country house after they have a strong disagreement over who is engaged to “Ernest,” Gwendolen declares to Cecily that the “gentleman who is now embracing you is my cousin, Mr. Algernon Moncrieff” (Wilde, *Earnest* 122). Algy’s self-identification as Ernest is proven to be invalid by a member of society, and he is returned to his true name, which was parentally given according to society’s conventions. In the final scene of the play, Lady Bracknell, aunt to both Jack and Algy, establishes Jack and Algy as biological brothers (142). Interestingly, rather than reverse or undo Algy’s claim to be Jack’s brother, this claim of brotherhood is proven to be true, surprising Algy yet placing him back in compliance with society’s formula of family acquisition through birth. These events re-instate Algy with both the name and brother given by his parents. However, they also make Algy much less interesting and more commonplace. Rather than being an imaginative and impulsive character who creates imaginary persons and pretends to be someone he is not, Algy becomes a character who unimaginatively follows the social scripts of birth and death, which effaces the individuality which he had previously established by not following the social scripts.

Like Algy’s individuality, Miss Prism’s individuality is established by how her story does not follow the social scripts for both birth and death; but where his performance involves the creation of a person, hers involves an unintentional exchange of personhood. At the very end of
the play, others discover that after Miss Prism confused her manuscript with the infant she was
cared for, she “deposited the manuscript in the bassinette, and placed the baby in
the hand-bag” and left the hand-bag “in the cloak-room of one of the larger railway stations in
London” (Wilde, *Earnest* 140). Although Miss Prism’s story is very unlike Jack’s, hers also
clearly does not obediently follow the prescribed system and so does not merit communal
acceptance. When the location of the infant is unknown, his existence cannot be sanctioned by
his relationship with his parents and family. By losing the infant, Miss Prism effectively makes
the infant “dead” to both her and his family. In addition, by accidently replacing the infant
(whose personhood was originally created by his birth into a respectable family) with her three-
volume novel, she inadvertently gives personhood (and a kind of birth) to the novel. However,
this birth-by-exchange is completely outside of society’s approved procedures. Thus, Miss
Prism’s lost manuscript and carpetbag give her two distinctive and abnormal stories which make
her intriguing to the audience and to the other characters but which also deprive her of a reified
social identity.

This mis-performance is rectified in the course of only a few minutes, which return Miss
Prism to a communally accepted performance and identity. When Lady Bracknell comes to
Jack’s country house, she tells Miss Prism and all those assembled of the “perambulator” which
was found to contain a “three-volume novel of more than usually revolting sentimentality” rather
than the infant she was charged with (Wilde, *Earnest* 139). When Jack realizes that he was the
baby Miss Prism lost (141), he and the manuscript exchange places once again. Jack is restored
to life, and the text becomes inanimate. Then his originally bestowed social identity as Ernest,
the child of Lady Bracknell’s sister, is returned, and the text is denied the identity of personhood
that it had received from him. These reversals of mis-performed birth and death scripts undo her
previous mistaken performance and place Miss Prism back in the realm of accepted performance. This takes away Miss Prism’s distinctive stories and thus her individuality but enables her to obtain a normalized identity.

Like Algy and Miss Prism, Cecily also performs an identity that is outside of society’s scripts; however, her performance of individuality relates to marriage rather than birth and death. After Algy declares his love to Cecily, she calmly informs him that, unbeknownst to him or anyone else, they “have been engaged for the last three months” because she grew tired of waiting and “determined to end the matter . . . and accepted you one evening under this dear old tree” (Wilde, *Earnest* 112-13). She then shows him the ring and bangle with the “true lover’s knot” which she had bought herself in his name and tells him that she had been “forced to write your letters for you” (Wilde 113). By doing this, Cecily took the leading role in her engagement. According to society’s conventions for engagement, the man involved was supposed to get permission from the woman’s guardians before discussing it with her. He was also the one responsible for buying the trinkets, like her ring and bangle. Although the bangle had a knot on it which was supposed to represent “true love,” it was entirely fake as not even Algy, who she claimed as her love, originally knew of it or even her existence. Sos Eltis points out that by taking the initiative in her engagement, Cecily rejects society’s pattern of “the role of eternally faithful maiden who waits patiently to be united with her beloved” (187). Rather than an “eternally faithful” and “patient” girl, she demonstrates that she is headstrong in acting on her own and impatient in getting what she wants. While her rejection of society’s traditions positions her without a socially authorized identity, it makes her strong personality obvious.

In order to obtain an authorized identity and come back into sanctioned society, Cecily gives up her strong personality. In exchange, the portions of her story which are in conflict with
society’s formulas for marriage and engagement are adopted or accepted by those who make up society. For Cecily, the normalization of her unique story takes place gradually over the course of several hours. This process begins when Cecily tells Algy of the trinkets that she imagined he had bought for her and he responds by willingly accepting responsibility for choosing the “very pretty” bangle (Wilde, *Earnest* 113). Algy’s acceptance of Cecily’s attribution of the bangle to him becomes an endorsement which morphs this portion of Cecily’s unique story into a common story of a trinket given by a man to a woman in courtship. This, however, is not enough to place Cecily within the social expectations of marriage and give her a social identity. Her engagement must also be approved of by her guardian, Jack. While trying to convince Lady Bracknell to let him marry Gwendolyn, Jack approves of Cecily and Algy’s engagement and says that he will “most gladly allow” it, but then he “decline[s]” to give his “consent” until Lady Bracknell consents to his marriage with Gwendolen (136-37). This half endorsement by her guardian places Cecily’s engagement in a liminal state between personal script and social script. After Jack’s social identity is sanctioned by Lady Bracknell, however, he gives his permission to Cecily. Headstrong Cecily obtains her goal of being engaged to Jack’s brother, but only by giving up her individuality and allowing others to take responsibility for what she had actually initiated. Thus, in the last few lines of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Cecily’s performance of identity is fully re-written in a manner of which society completely approves.

Through this re-writing of their life stories, Algy’s, Miss Prism’s, and Cecily’s performances of identity outside of society’s scripts are each re-written and normalized, but their individuality has been effaced in the process. John Kaplan describes how unique things are reduced to “troubling uniforms” when mass-produced for the public (334). The word “uniforms” suggests clothing which identifies a group while making them appear the same or something
which is unvarying and static. In this manner, Algy’s, Miss Prism’s, and Cecily’s individuality is reduced to “uniforms” of identity. Rather than having distinctive stories and circumstances, they are each placed within the constraints of the ritualistic performance of social scripts for birth, death, or marriage. Not only does their identity become like a uniform that they wear, but they also each receive the uniform ending of engagement. This uniformity is manifest in the ending when all three couples, characters who were previously very different from each other, have the same ending with the same closing lines, “[name of significant other]! At last!” (Wilde, Earnest 144). This is troubling because it shows the power which social identity can have over individuality.

Individuality and social identity are two opposing forces which influence the performance of characters in The Importance of Being Earnest. However, it is social identity that ultimately overpowers individuality in the play, effacing it to the point of making the characters monotonously uniform. As a result, the characters become essentially interchangeable in the last few lines of the play. If, as Wilde suggested, the essence of an individual can be gathered through observing their outward appearances, there is an inherent conflict between the essence of a person’s individuality and a uniform and potentially superficial social identity (Wilde, Dorian Gray 16). Powell and Mackie both observe that identity is not necessarily the essence of an individual but is based on mere outward appearances (Powell 102, Mackie 152). Thus, while the essence of a character’s individuality may be gathered through outward appearances, once the characters gain a social identity, it is only their interaction with society’s scripts which may be observed.
Works Cited


