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A.B.Walkley, on *The Importance of Being Earnest* 1895

Review signed ‘A.B.W.’ in the *Speaker* 23 February 1895, iv, 212–13. Of interest here is Walkley’s attempt to analyse the source of wit in Wilde’s play, one of the few attempts at the time. Walkley seems to have seen, as few other critics did, that *The Importance of Being Earnest* was the culmination of Wilde’s development as a dramatist.

Believe me, it is with no ironic intention that I declare Mr. Oscar Wilde to have ‘found himself’, at last, as an artist in sheer nonsense. There has been good nonsense in his previous stage-work, but it failed to give unalloyed pleasure, either because it adopted serious postures or was out of harmony with an environment of seriousness. In his farce at the St. James’s—Mr. Archer, I see, thinks the word ‘farce’ derogatory here; but why? We call *The Wasps* and *Le Médecin malgré Lui* farces—in his farce, then, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, there is no discordant note of seriousness. It is of nonsense all compact, and better nonsense, I think, our stage has not seen. This is not to be wondered at; Mr. Wilde has the advantage, an immense advantage for any artificer of the ludicrous, of being the last comer. We often hear protests raised against the view that art ‘progresses’: art is, people say, it is a thing immovable, indeed, the only thing:—

*Tout passe. Hart robuste*  
*Seul a l’éternité,*  
*Le buste*  
*Survit à la cité.*

And we are asked how the west front of Amiens Cathedral has ‘progressed’ beyond the Elgin marbles, or *Hamlet* beyond the Oresteian trilogy. Leaving the general question undiscussed, I am quite sure one art has ‘progressed’, and that is the art which works in the medium of the ludicrous. Indeed, looking at a great subject in one aspect only, I think the history of civilisation is a history of gradual improvement in the quality of our laughter. To a modern, the laughter of the antique stage is cruel, or stupid, or simply incomprehensible. What a gulf there is between ancient and modern ideas on this subject may be seen from the significant little fact that, in the brief passage of the *Poetics* in which Aristotle refers to comedy (which, to be sure, was in his time only farce), he makes the ridiculous a sub-division of the ugly. Cicero—it is one of the commonplaces of the subject (or I, for one, should not be aware of the passage)—thought that bodily

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1 ‘All passes. Enduring art alone is eternal. The bust outlasts the city.’ From Théophile Gautier’s ‘L’Art’ in *Emaux et Camées* (1857).
deformities were ‘satis bella materies ad jocandum’; an opinion in which gutter-urchins are now your only Ciceronians. Molière’s fun was ferociously cruel (Georges Dandin) or mere horseplay (passim). It is we moderns who have made Tartuffe and Shylock serious personages; beyond a doubt they were designed, in the main, to be comic. It is unnecessary to go on demonstrating the obvious. In one thing, at any rate, we surpass the great men of old and our fore-fathers that begat us; our laughter is of better quality.

Here is, perhaps, a general reason for the great strides made by the art of farce-writing in recent years; but there is also, I think, a special cause—the abandonment of realism for fantasy. Mr. Pinero (for we must not forget that the author of Mrs. Tanqueray is also the author of The Magistrate, The Schoolmistress, Dandy Dick, and The Cabinet Minister) and Mr. Gilbert were the pioneers of this movement. But enough of realism—or, at any rate, of side-reference to life—remained in their farces to mingle a little contempt with the laughter. The central idea of all Mr. Pinero’s farces—the infliction of indignities on a dignitary—is not wholly joyous. As for Mr. Gilbert, he makes us laugh more often than not ‘on the wrong side of our mouths.’ His Engaged, for instance, is as grim as The Duchess ofMalfi. Now the merit of The Importance of Being Earnest is that the laughter it excites is absolutely free from bitter afterthought. Mr. Wilde makes his personages ridiculous, but—you will admit the distinction?—he does not ridicule them. He introduces personages ostensibly of to-day, young men ‘about town,’ ‘revolting’ daughters, a clergyman, a prim governess, a glib valet; but he does not poke fun at them as types; he induces us to laugh at their conduct for its sheer whimsicality, not as illustrating the foibles of their class.

I say we laugh at the whimsicality of their conduct. But in what, precisely, does this consist? Why, precisely, do we laugh? To answer such questions satisfactorily would involve the discussion of another question—the nature of all laughter. It is a vast subject: the gravest philosophers, from Kant to Mr. Herbert Spencer, have not yet been able to tell us why we laugh. The latest student of the psychology of laughter is M.Camille Mélinand, who puts forward some interesting Views on the subject in the current number of the Revue des Deux Mondes. His conclusion, briefly stated, is, that the necessary condition for laughter is the simultaneous recognition of the absurd and the natural in the thing laughed at. Every mental process ultimately consists in the classification in known categories of things yet unknown. When the thing is not to be placed in any known category, it entirely escapes our thought (e.g. a foreign language which we cannot speak); that is the incomprehensible. When the thing is to be placed in two mutually exclusive categories, it shocks our thought (e.g. a quadrilateral triangle); that is the absurd. When the thing enters promptly into one category, we have the calm satisfaction of thinking, of knowing; that is the rational. When the thing is, on one side, absurd, and, on the other, falls into a familiar category, our thought is accompanied by a spasmodic shake; that is laughter. Let us see if this will help us to understand why we laugh at Mr. Wilde’s personages. Take the capital situation of the farce. John Worthing, who is John in the country and (for the old reason) ‘Ernest’ in town, determines to kill off his imaginary brother Ernest, and arrives at his country-house clad in complete mourning. The mere sight of him in this garb sets us off laughing. For we guess at once what he is going to do; and we have just seen his bosom friend arrive at the house in the assumed character of the very Ernest who is now to be given out as dead. Why do we laugh? Because, knowing what we do, we recognise John’s conduct as absurd; but, on the other hand, we recognise it, given only his knowledge, as natural. So with all the actions of the play. Two girls, believing themselves engaged to the same man, and deadly foes in consequence, show their enmity by squabbling over the division of the cake at the tea-table. A young man, about to be kicked out of the house, declines to go until he has finished the muffins. Another, finding that his sweetheart only loves him because she believes him to bear the name of Ernest, resolves to be christened ‘Ernest’ forthwith—and anxiously asks the parson whether he is likely to

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1 Good enough subject for joking.
catch cold in the process, etc. A smooth valet gravely announces himself as a pessimist, and, being ironically complimented by his master, replies that ‘he has always tried to give satisfaction.’ A handbag in which Worthing was left thirty years ago in a cloak-room is produced as a clue to a romantic mystery; as anti-climax, its owner, a prim governess, remarks that ‘she has been much inconvenienced by the want of it.’ I take these details at random, not with any idea of describing the piece—that, like every other good farce, is not to be described—but as aids to the analysis of my laughter. You see that the conduct of the people in itself is rational enough; it is exquisitely irrational in the circumstances. Their motives, too, are quite rational in themselves; they are only irrational as being fitted to the wrong set of actions. And the result is that you have something like real life in detail, yet, in sum, absolutely unlike it; the familiar materials of life shaken up, as it were, and rearranged in a strange, unreal pattern. It is this combination of the natural and the absurd which, according to M. Mélinand’s theory, causes our laughter. Whatever its cause, it is, to my mind, the most delightful form of laughter. You are in a world that is real yet fantastic; the most commonsense actions of daily life take place, with the one important difference that the common sense has been left out; you have fallen among amiable, gay, and witty lunatics. Of course, a root-idea of farce like this requires an aristocratic milieu for due expansion, an atmosphere of wealth and leisure; Mr. Wilde’s people would be monsters, had they not several thousands a year, handles to their names, Grandisonian butlers, and dresses from the Rue de la Paix. And (as there is a touch of the snob in all of us) this Persic apparatus completes the general impression of gaiety.