

Pre-Raphaelite Paintings in Oliver Parker's Film Adaptation of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*

ÉVA PÉTERI

DOI: 10.53720/FXQH6396

Abstract: In Oliver Parker's film adaptation (2002) of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), Cecily's fictional diary features two Victorian paintings: John Everett Millais' *The Knight Errant* (1870) and John Melhuish Strudwick's *Acrasia* (1888). In my paper, I explore how these visual references contribute to the viewers' understanding of the plot and the characters, and what is suggested by their application about the director's view of the pictures themselves.

Whereas Oliver Parker's adaptation of Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband* "earn[ed] critical plaudits" (Hazelton) on its launch in 1999, his 2002 film version of Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* was given a less enthusiastic reception. Though some critics have found it "witty, charming [and] entertaining" (Nash), "a well-made rendition of [the] truly funny play" (Clifford), and a "worthy attempt at bringing Wilde's most brilliant comedy to the screen" (Hanke); others reacted with discontent, describing the film as "a frustrating, boring mess" (LaSalle), "unfunny" and "misbegotten" (Young), or "utterly miscalculated" (Koehler). As Dennis Schwartz claims, Wilde's play "is not easy to transfer to film, especially since it is so verbal and created for the stage." Parker took up the challenge with the definite aim to "tak[e] it away from the theatrical as much as [he] could" (Parker). He made spectacular and often stunning visual extensions, contriving

scenes like Algy's arrival in the country in a hot-air balloon, Gwendolen's visit to a tattoo-salon, or Cecily's daydreams about medieval knights in armour. Neil Young finds Parker's additions and amendments "idiotic," regarding the director's "attempts at opening out the material [as] little short of disastrous," while Mick LaSalle simply finds them "meaningless." Lisa Schwarzbaum is likewise critical of Parker's additions. She likens the production to "the efforts of a bluffing student who ... rearranges pictures cut from magazines into interpretive collages for extra credit," and claims that "the clean geometry of Wilde's satire is broken by [such] incoherent, extraneous references [like] the dreamy nineteenth-century paintings of Edward Burne-Jones [sic]."

Parker's film does, indeed, give visual references to two Pre-Raphaelite pictures, though not to Burne-Jones: one of these is John Everett Millais's *The Knight Errant* (1870)¹ and the other one is John Melhuish Strudwick's *Acrasia* (1888).² They are related to the chivalric revival of the Victorian age, and both appear in the film as images in Cecily Cardew's diary, illustrating her fanciful, amorous desires concerning Ernest Worthing, the imaginary wicked brother of her guardian, Jack Worthing. Challenging Lisa Schwarzbaum's casual dismissal of these details, the present essay intends to show that Parker's treatment of the chivalric topic and the references to Millais' and Strudwick's pictures are neither "incoherent," nor "extraneous," but they fully fit the Wildean concept of art, of the age, the play, as well as its characters.

Oscar Wilde claimed that *The Importance of Being Earnest* "is exquisitely trivial, a delicate bubble of fancy, and it has its philosophy ... [t]hat we should treat all the trivial things of life seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality" (*Interviews* 250). Accordingly, the world presented in the play is absurd: the traditional values become meaningless and nothing functions as it should. Love is reduced to the mere fancy of marrying someone named Ernest, and the ceremony of christening is referred to as a simple act of "sprinkling" (*The Importance* 107). Even death is conferred about without due respect: receiving the news of the death of (the imaginary) Ernest, Miss Prism comments: "What a lesson for him! I trust

-
- 1 John Everett Millais (1829–1896) was one of the founders of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in 1848. Later, he left behind the meticulously realistic and often symbolic early Pre-Raphaelite style and started painting "increasingly sentimental and popular subjects" (Ash 293).
 - 2 John Melhuish Strudwick (1849–1937) was a follower of Edward Burne-Jones. He worked for years as Burne-Jones' studio assistant, but he "also produced his own highly personal version of the Burne-Jones style." As Wood claims, "[h]is subjects are usually deliberately allegorical, and the compositions somewhat static, but they have a remarkable richness of decorative effect" (137–139).

he will profit by it” (105). Literature is not spared either. Miss Prism’s “manuscript of a three-volume novel of more than usually revolting sentimentality” (139) is easily exchanged for baby Jack, and the meaning and function of the non-fictional literary form, the diary also become twisted. Whereas Gwendolen’s diary functions as diaries should, that is, keeping an account of happenings, recording events and thoughts at a given time; Cecily’s diary is, to a great extent, fictional, it records scenes that have never happened: her engagement to Ernest, then the breaking-off of the engagement, and finally their reconciliation. Though Cecily really believes that her guardian has a wicked brother, she is well-aware of the fact that her diary is nonsensical. To her governess Miss Prism’s question why she keeps a diary at all, she answers: “I keep a diary in order to enter the wonderful secrets of my life” (98). And although she agrees with Miss Prism’s opinion that “[m]emory is the diary that we all carry about with us,” she adds that “it usually chronicles the things that have never happened and couldn’t possibly have happened” (98).

Reading the play, or even watching a theatre performance of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the readers or the spectators can only get verbal references concerning the content of Cecily’s diary. But in a film adaptation there is the opportunity to make such details visible, and Parker takes this opportunity. Cecily has a big, fairy-tale book as her diary in the film—as opposed to Gwendolen’s notebook-like, small diary—with illustrations overshadowing the text. Millais’ and Strudwick’s paintings appear amid these, as full-page illustrations. These are, as Parker explains, prints she might have got from London, images that influence her “very large and powerful fantasy life.” Both paintings are first shown as images in the diary, then the viewers can see how Cecily is fantasising about them, imagining herself in the heroines’ place and Ernest into that of the knights featuring in the paintings. In Robert Koehler’s opinion “Parker ruins the effect [of Cecily’s drifting off ‘into romantic fantasies’] by archly depicting them on screen.” Mick LaSalle goes even further, claiming that these have “nothing to do with Wilde or even Cecily’s personality.” A closer look at them, however, reveals that these painterly references are meaningful and are in a close correspondence with the overall concept of Wilde’s play as well as with Cecily’s character.

Millais’ *The Knight Errant* is one of the numerous Victorian paintings representing an act of chivalry. As the painter wrote in the Royal Exhibition catalogue in 1870, when the picture was first shown to the public: “the order of Knights errant was instituted to protect widows and orphans, and to succour maidens in distress,”

adding that the picture shows “an act of medieval chivalry in which one such Knight errant ... is on the point of freeing a woman who has been stripped and tied to a tree” (qtd. in “Sir John Everett Millais”). The woman’s clothes are on the ground, and in the background, “her molesters, assumed to be robbers” (“Sir John Everett Millais”), can be seen fleeing. The knight’s sword is stained with blood, and behind him, the torso of a dead body is visible, which might suggest that the knight has killed one of the woman’s assailants. According to Paul Barlow, there is a “tension between ‘desire’ and ‘chivalry’” in the painting (153), as the scene is both a chivalric one depicting the rescue of a damsel in distress, but it is also “one of exposure and of unrestrained violent desire” (151). As Barlow further argues, the attackers “have stripped and bound her, presumably as a prelude to rape” (151). Violence might also be suggested by the tree, a Silver Birch, to which she has been tied. This tree “was commonly identified with the female gender in the nineteenth century and was sometimes referred to as ‘lady Birch’ [and its] twigs were also traditionally used in flagellations” (qtd. in “Sir John Everett Millais”).

The original version of the painting was even more concerned with the theme of lust than the one that can now be seen in the Tate Gallery and also in Parker’s film. X-ray photographs have revealed that the woman was originally depicted facing the knight, “establishing eye contact” (“Sir John Everett Millais”). According to the painter’s son, his father “came to the conclusion that the beautiful creature would look more modest if her head [was] turned away, so he ... repainted it” (Millais 24, vol. 2). Millais’ decision to make this alteration was probably also induced by the controversial critical reception of the painting and the consequent fact that it remained unsold after its 1870 exhibition at the Royal Academy. While the victimised naked woman appeared to some, like to the contemporary critic, Tom Taylor, as still “clothed in chastity” (qtd. in Smith 157), others made “assumptions about the woman’s probable loose morals” (“Sir John Everett Millais”). In its present form—the woman turning away from the knight as well as from the spectators—the emphasis clearly falls on her sense of shame.

Cecily’s fantasising envisioned by Parker definitely turns the chivalric story into an erotic fantasy, despite the fact that Cecily is fully dressed in the film. Cecily’s face, shown frontally in the film, expresses desire and her longing for the knight. As Sarah Kerr critically comments, the scene is one of Parker’s “hard-working, literal-minded attempts to get sex into the mix” (74). As the chivalric aspect becomes irrelevant, the robbers and the dead attacker are eliminated. There is, however, genuine

mockery in Cecily's dreaming about a knight rescuing her, as her fantasy world provides her an escape from her boring studies, from "Horrid Political Economy! Horrid Geography! Horrid, horrid German" (100). Correspondingly, her amorous longing is suddenly brought to an end by the call of her tutor, Miss Prism, making Cecily return to reality and her studies.

The second Pre-Raphaelite painterly reference appears a little later in the film. With the unexpected arrival of Algernon Moncrieff, Jack's friend, who pretends to be Ernest, Cecily's dreams suddenly come true: Algernon starts courting her. Again, the painting, in this case, Strudwick's *Acrasia*, first appears as an illustration in Cecily's diary, then it is related to the exact location and situation: the garden of Jack's manor house and the courtship of Cecily and Algernon, with the imaginary medieval accessories added to these by Cecily's fantasy. Strudwick's *Acrasia* itself is a controversial picture concerning its presentation of chivalry and lust. At first sight, it seems to depict an idyllic scene; a closer look, however, reveals its sinister character.

Unlike *The Knight Errant*, which is an imaginary chivalric scene, *Acrasia* is based on literature. It depicts the "false enchaunteresse" (Spenser 108) of the Bower of Bliss from Book 2 of Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590–1596). Spenser's poem is an allegory, where Sir Guyon in Book 2 appears as the knight of Temperance, accompanied by a guide called the Palmer, usually thought to represent reason. Sir Guyon sets on a quest to destroy Acrasia's Bower of Bliss, a garden of alluring sensuous pleasure and delight, where Acrasia "makes her lovers drunken mad; / And then with words & weedes of wondrous might, / On them she workes her will to uses bad" (109). Approaching the bower, Sir Guyon and the Palmer hear "a most melodious sound" (192) of "Angelicall soft trembling voyces" accompanied by the sound of "instruments divine" (193). Then, they spot "the wanton Lady, with her lover lose, / Whose sleepe head she in her lap did soft dispose" (192). The young man, her latest victim seems to be of noble birth, a knight-at-arms, now inert and powerless against the witchcraft of Acrasia. Forgetting his duties, he has given himself up to the world of pleasures. Then, Sir Guyon takes Acrasia by surprise, captures her, and makes her victims, formerly transformed into beasts, human and free again. As Stephen Coote summarises, "[t]he Bower of Bliss itself is [an] example of Spenser's contriving a place ... as an allegory of a state of mind. The Bower of Bliss indicates lascivious and somehow cloying eroticism that Spenser sees as a great danger threatening Guyon, his personification of Temperance and self-control" (79).

According to Andrea Rose, Strudwick's work usually shows "little real understanding of the significance of the myths and legends upon which it draws" (124). Nevertheless, his *Acrasia* follows Spenser's text quite closely: we can see the maidens singing and playing beautifully crafted musical instruments; and we can see Acrasia and her unconscious victim, his head resting in her lap, the cup of magic potion that has fallen out of his hand, and his sword resting idle next to it, as well as his "brave shield full of old monuments" hanging "upon a tree" (194). *Acrasia* is looking down on the knight with a sinister and triumphant smile.

As John Christian writes, Strudwick's art "rel[ies] for its effect on surface decoration and often evoke[s] a mood of cloying sweetness" (92). Both these features are apparent in this painting, too. The decorative quality is present in the lush foliage and the weighty, ripe fruits of the tree, the fading but still lush rose blossoms scattered around, and the delicate, exotic-looking musical instruments. The term, "cloying sweetness," is especially apt here, as it well-corresponds to the theme: *Acrasia* offers a sensual delight that becomes destructive.

Notwithstanding all these references, those spectators of Parker's film who are unaware of the painting's narrative background would hardly suspect that what they see is a scene of vicious seduction. Cecily, too, seems to be unaware of it. As in the case of Millais' *The Knight Errant*, she assumes the role of the painted heroine in her dreams, and imagines Algy into the role of the victimised knight. The parallel between Cecily and *Acrasia* is, however, more intriguing than it might seem. Though Cecily appears to be an innocent country girl, a ward dependent on her guardian, she does have the upper hand on many occasions. She makes, for example, her guardian Jack accept Algy's hand, gives Gwendolen tea with sugar and cakes instead of bread and butter despite Gwendolen's explicit request of the opposite, and defies Lady Bracknell's suggestion "to wait till [she] was thirty-five" (137) with getting married. And, most importantly, her behaviour with Algernon is openly seductive. She has the dominant role in all the scenes they have together: Algy's is reduced to perplexed questions and short answers concerning Cecily's invented story of their attachment. As Parker states in his audio commentary, Algy completely "subordinates his desires to those of Cecily, because of [her] extraordinary power."

Nevertheless, in Parker's film there is no sign of Cecily being a cruel enchantress. She looks genuinely happy in her Bower of Bliss and infatuated with Algy, rejoicing over having been at last united with her "knight." Algy, however, captivated in his suit of armour, is ridiculous, the musicians are showy, and the huge,

PRE-RAPHAELITE PAINTINGS

golden-red apples hanging upon a garden tree are artificial. The Bower of Bliss, as imagined by Cecily, is rather a mockery of Strudwick's picture with exaggerated, even nonsensical details. Cecily's misconception of Strudwick's *Acrasia* and Millais' *The Knight Errant* seems to parody the paintings as well as the chivalric ideal they are intended to represent.

Parker's mockery of chivalry culminates at the very end of the movie. All of a sudden, the drawing room of Jack's manor house is transformed into a place of absurd vision: one of Strudwick's musicians appears performing in between the mantel-piece and a bush, and Algy is shown standing as if paralysed in full armour, while Cecily is mounted on a huge horse. It is no longer the projection of Cecily's imagination: it is the director's hint to the spectators that nothing should be taken seriously. It is also a visual pun on Gwendolen and Jack's preceding conversation about Jack really being Ernest, and it is followed by the scene when Lady Bracknell looks into the military directory and finds that Jack lies: his name is not Ernest; therefore, he is not earnest either. By providing an insight into the book, Parker gives a funny and relevant twist to the resolution of the play. At the same time, the film has an ironic self-reflexive character. As Marianne Dugeon argues, Parker "constantly plays on spectators being present around the characters watching them," who are like "many mirrors held up to the spectators in the cinema." Even the characters step out of their roles at times, like Algy, for example, being "as surprised as the spectators" when, wooing Cecily, he "suddenly finds himself in knight's armour."

The theme of chivalry never comes up in Wilde's play: all these references are Parker's own inventions. Yet the film is in full agreement with Wilde's concept of *The Importance of Being Earnest* that ridicules basic Victorian moral and social values. The Victorians held chivalric values in high esteem. In one of his speeches, novelist and social writer Charles Kingsley (1819–1875) called on his listeners to be "a knight-errant or lady-errant," to be "just as chivalrous as if [they] lived in an old fairy land, such as Spenser talked of in his 'Faerie Queene'" (qtd. in Houghton 319). The much-respected art critic, John Ruskin (1819–1900) also expressed his wish in *Sesame and Lilies* (1865) that "there were a true order of chivalry instituted for [the] English youth ... in which both boy and girl should receive [their] knight-hood and ladyhood by true title; attainable only by certain probation and trial of both character and accomplishment" (99n*). When Oliver Parker makes fun of the Victorian chivalric ideal in his film adaptation of *The Importance of Being Earnest*,

he just imitates what Oscar Wilde has done in his play: he ridicules one of the ideals that the Victorians so much cherished.

Furthermore, with the insertion of the Pre-Raphaelite pictures and their enaction on screen, Parker cleverly hints at the famous paradox stated in Wilde's *The Decay of Lying*: "that Life imitates art far more than Art imitates life" (32). But the parallel between Parker's film and Wilde's paradox is even closer, as the playwright justifies his claim by describing how fashionable women in his contemporary England made efforts to have the mystic looks and the loveliness of the idealised female beauties depicted in the canvases of two Pre-Raphaelite painters, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Edward Burne-Jones (*The Decay of Lying* 32). Thus, Cecily's Pre-Raphaelite-inspired visions and desires in Parker's *The Importance of Being Earnest* are definitely meaningful and relevant cinematic additions to Wilde's play.

WORKS CITED

- Ash, Russell. "Sir John Everett Millais." In *Victorian Masters and Their Art*. Ed. Russell Ash. London: Pavilion, 1999. 285–377.
- Barlow, Paul. *Time Past and Time Present: The Art of John Everett Millais*. Ashgate, 2005.
- Christian, John. "Catalogue." In *The Last Romantics: The Romantic Tradition in British Art, Burne-Jones to Stanley Spencer*. Eds. John Christian, Mary Anne Stevenson. Lund Humphries, 1998. 77–204.
- Clifford, Robin. "The Importance of Being Earnest." *Reeling Reviews*. Web. 20 Feb 2022. <<https://www.reelingreviews.com/theimportanceofbeingearnest.htm>>
- Coote, Stephen. *The Penguin Short History of English Literature*. Penguin Books, 1993.
- Durgeon, Marianne. "Aestheticism on the Wildean Stage." *Études Anglaises* 69.1 (2016): 88–99. Web. 18 Feb 2022. <<https://doi.org/10.3917/etan.691.0088>>
- Hanke, Ken. "The Importance of Being Earnest." *Mountain Xpress*. 2000. Web. 19 Feb 2022. <<https://mountainx.com/movies/reviews/importancebeingearnest-php/>>
- Hazelton, John. "The Importance of Being Earnest." *Screen Daily*. 16 May 2002. Web. 17 July 2021. <<https://www.screendaily.com/the-importance-of-being-earnest/409236.article>>
- Houghton, Walter E. *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830–1870*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957.

PRE-RAPHAELITE PAINTINGS

- Kerr, Sarah. "The Importance of Being Earnest by Oliver Parker." *Film Comment* 38.3 (2002): 73–74.
- Koehler, Robert. "The Importance of Being Earnest." *Variety*. 12 May 2002. Web. 17 July 2021. <<https://variety.com/2002/film/reviews/the-importance-of-being-earnest-18-1200549743/>>
- LaSalle, Mick. "Director ruins 'Being Earnest.'" *SFGate*. 24 May 2002. Web. 20 Feb 2022. <<https://www.sfgate.com/movies/article/Director-ruins-Being-Earnest-2818546.php>>
- Millais, John Guille. *The Life and Letters of Sir John Everett Millais, President of the Royal Academy*. 2 vols. Methuen and Co., 1905.
- Nash, Scott. "The Importance of Being Earnest." *Three Movie Buffs: Movie Reviews*. 19 May 2002. Web. 20 Feb 2022. <<http://www.threemoviebuffs.com/review/importanceofbeingearnest.html>>
- Parker, Oliver, dir. *The Importance of Being Earnest* [Audio Commentary]. Miramax, 2002.
- Rose, Andrea. *The Pre-Raphaelites*. Phaidon, 1981.
- Ruskin, John. *Sesame and Lilies*. Silver, Burdett & Company, 1900.
- Schwartz, Dennis. "The Importance of Being Earnest." *Dennis Schwartz Movie Reviews*. 5 Aug 2019. Web. 17 July 2021. <<https://dennisschwartzreviews.com/importanceofbeingearnest2002/>>
- Schwarzbaum, Lisa. "The Importance of Being Earnest." *Entertainment Weekly*. 17 Mar 2020. Web. 18 July 2021. <<https://ew.com/article/2002/05/24/importance-being-earnest-4/>>
- "Sir John Everett Millais: *The Knight Errant*, 1870." *Tate: Art and Artists*. Web. 20 Jan 2022. <<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/millais-the-knight-errant-n01508>>
- Smith, Alison. *The Victorian Nude: Sexuality, Morality, and Art*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996.
- Spenser, Edmund. *The Faerie Queene*. Crowell, 1903.
- Wilde, Oscar. "The Decay of Lying." In *Intentions*. New York: Brentano's, 1905. 1–56.
- . *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Ed. Samuel Lyndon Gladden. Broadview Editions, 2010.
- . *Interviews and Recollections*. Vol. 1. Ed. E. H. Mikhail. Barnes & Noble, 1979.
- Wood, Christopher. *The Pre-Raphaelites*. Wiedenfeld and Nicolson, 1983.

ÉVA PÉTERI

Young, Neil. “Neil Young’s Film Lounge—*The Importance of Being Earnest*.” *Neil Young’s Film Lounge*. 2 July 2002. Web. 20 Feb 2022. <<https://www.jigsawlounge.co.uk/film/beingearnest.html>>

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Éva Péteri is Associate Professor at the Department of English Studies, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest. Her field of research includes the literary aspects of Pre-Raphaelite art and the connections between Victorian and Hungarian art and culture. She is the author of *Victorian Approaches to Religion as Reflected in the Art of the Pre-Raphaelites* (Akadémiai Kiadó, 2003), “Pre-Raphaelitism in Hungary” (*Worldwide Pre-Raphaelitism*, SUNY Press, 2005). She has published essays in the *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies* (“The Hungarian Holy Crown in Burne-Jones’s Avalon,” 2005; “Revisiting James Collinson’s Representation of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary,” 2018) and *The Journal of William Morris Studies* (“William Morris’s ‘A King’s Lesson’: A Hungarian Perspective,” 2009). Her most recent publication is “Female Roles, Female Destinies: Aspects of Femininity in Pre-Raphaelite Art” in the exhibition catalogue entitled *Desired Beauty: Pre-Raphaelite Masterpieces from the Tate Collection* (Szépművészeti Múzeum, 2021).