

A Woman of No Importance

O. Wilde

February 27–28, 2012

Basically the plot is about three people. The cynic Lord Illingworth (meant to be a self-portrait), Mrs Arbuthnot, and Gerald. The latter is a young naive man who is delighted at being appointed by Illingworth to be his secretary and come out in the world and move in smart society. Illingworth and Mrs Arbuthnot once had a relationship, with Illingworth promising to marry her, but renegading on his promise, and she was left to bring birth to their common child deserted and on her own. The fruit of that relationship was Gerald. Thus she is aghast at the idea of her son taking up with that dandy, especially as he is the one who treated her so shamefully. The truth is bound to come out, and after an intermission when Gerald tries to bring back honor to her mother by imploring Illingworth to marry her, he gives up, and takes up with a young, pretty and above all very rich American heiress, thus making himself independent upon the largess of his natural father, who is meant to display no tender emotions towards his progeny, in fact at the end of the play about to dismiss him as a mere bastard. Thus while Mrs Arbuthnot at the beginning is indeed a woman of no importance, by the rejection of the son, he Illingworth becomes a man of no importance. Naturally the plot is so melodramatic that it would not by itself hold the interest of an audience, especially as its enactment is very melodramatic as well, including long sentimental soliloquies, written by a man, who if anything is the master of the one-liner.

The basic plot is saved by embedding it in a garden party, with a wide range of various characters, giving plenty of opportunity for the playwright to gently tease us about social foibles. There is the hostess, a blend of naivety and cunning; there is the woman with her fourth husband whom she holds on a very short leash. There is the adventuress Mrs Allonby who plays the female counterpart to Lord Illingworth, doing as a female, what he has a license to do as a male, and that, I guess, is enough to make her into a comic character. Maybe the most amusing character does not even attend stage, it is the wife of the Archdeacon, whose pathetic existence is only revealed by oblique references. She has been reduced to worry about her health as her only pastime, which the hostess thinks is a delightful way of spending your time. Illingworth is supposed to be a monster of cynicism, who is blessed with the most famous one lines of the play 'the unspeakable in pursuit of the uneatable', in reference to fox hunting. The problem is that for all his cynicism Wilde was never able to shed his basic innocence. His depravity was only skin-deep although he fancied himself rotten to the core. Hence Illingworth does not really engage you, in fact most of the characters are like cut-outs from a card-board, especially naive Gerald and his love, the admiring Hester. But of course as a period-piece it is delightful. Reading it, and maybe watching it, is like partaking of comics. It provides such effortless escape from reality, sketching a world, that although deeply unjust and superficial, nevertheless filled with a sunny charm. The basic sunniness of the Wilde's temperament, according to the Art historian Kenneth Clark.

Wilde wanted to shock, never to really disturb. To disturb was probably beyond him. The cynic announcements are so predictably ridiculous that they float like clouds over the heads without even singeing those they are supposed to hurt. If you scrape the skin of Wilde, you find an evangelist, prone to long sentimental harangues, as manifested in his 'de Profundis'. He is capable of a prose that transcends the crispness of his wit, with strong undertones of Biblical oratory. Had he not chosen to be a dandy, he probably would have opted to be a saint. With much less prospect of success.

February 28, 2012 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se