

Some Notes for the Dover Edition of *The Importance of Being Earnest*

Page 4. In British English, “mean” means “cheap.”

5. The Albany was a fashionable apartment house in London.

7. “Sent down” means “matched with a partner for dinner.” “Wagnerian” (pronounced “Vognerrian”) refers to the nineteenth-century German composer Richard Wagner, whose operas are long, passionate, and loud.

8. “Smart” means “fashionably dressed.”

9. “Your uncle would have to dine upstairs” means “My husband would have to eat with me and our dinner guests on the main (second) floor, instead of on the ground floor (‘below stairs’) with the servants.”

13. “Radically” (from a Latin word meaning “root” -- what is the name of a root vegetable that makes smoke come out of your ears?) means “fundamentally.”

When Lady Bracknell says, “What between the duties expected of one during one’s lifetime, and the duties exacted from one after one’s death,” she is punning on two senses of the word “duties”: social obligations and taxes.

At the time *The Importance of Being Earnest* was written, the Liberal Unionists were members of the Liberal Party who sided with the Conservatives (Tories) on one of the important issues of the day, home rule for Ireland. Wilde was serious about his own Irishness.

16. “The only way to behave to a woman is to make love to her” means only, “The only way to behave to a woman is to tell her, ‘I love you.’”

17. The Empire, in London, was a music hall: a theater specializing in variety shows.

18. How can Algy write on his shirt cuff? Because shirt cuffs at this time were bands of white cloth starched to rigidity. Like collars, they were buttoned, not sewn, onto their shirts.

22. In Victorian England, businesses called circulating libraries rented books by mail the way Netflix used to rent videos, and made a profit because the three-volume novels popular at the time were so expensive that renting was an attractive alternative. One of the biggest circulating libraries was Mudie’s Lending Library, whose influence Wilde is mocking here. By stocking only books with the equivalent of a G rating, Mudie’s (in Wilde’s view) kept British taste from growing up.

23. Egeria was the Roman goddess of fountains and childbirth and the advisor to Numa, the

second ruler of the city. Among bookish Victorians, “Egeria” was a cliché sobriquet for a woman teacher.

24. “I am obliged to go up by the first train”: British rail routes are designated either up (toward a city – in this case London) or down (away from it).

25. When Algernon asks for a button-hole, he means a flower to put in his lapel. Canon Chasuble shudders because Miss Prism’s word “womanthrope” is half Greek, half English, and all bad etymology. The correct antonym of “misanthrope” (a person who hates mankind) is “misogynist” (a person who hates women).

26. “He is dressed in the deepest mourning”: Victorian etiquette prescribed an elaborate dress code for bereaved relatives. You can find the details (and much else relating to the world of *The Importance of Being Earnest*) in Daniel Pool’s entertaining book *What Jane Austen Ate and Charles Dickens Knew: From Fox Hunting to Whist – The Facts of Daily Life in Nineteenth-Century England* (Simon & Schuster, 1993).

27. “Peculiarly susceptible” means “especially susceptible.” That’s the usual nineteenth-century meaning of “peculiarly.”

30. A dog-cart is an open-topped two-wheeled carriage with two seats arranged back to back. And Jack’s servants would address younger brother Ernest (that is, Algy) as “Mr. Ernest” because only the senior male, Jack, would be entitled to the honorific “Mr. Worthing.”

37. At the bottom of the page, Cecily is playing on two British senses of the word “common”: (1) frequently found and (2) vulgar.

46. “Terminus” means a railroad station at the end of the line. The word is also, of course, the antonym of “origin.”

47. The Funds were government securities, popular as a safe investment for independent incomes. And as of 1895, the date of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, a hundred and thirty thousand pounds were a huge fortune.

And Jack’s line “After six months nobody knew her” means, “After six months her reputation was so bad that nobody would associate with her.”

48. An Oxonian is (like Wilde) a graduate of Oxford University.

And about the title of the play: When Princess Victoria ascended to the throne of England in 1837, some sober, non-revolutionary Englishmen were wondering out loud whether the monarchy was really necessary any longer. After all, Victoria’s immediate predecessor, King

William IV, was not unfairly known to his subjects as Silly Billy, and *his* immediate predecessor, King George IV, known as “the first gentleman of Europe,” had devoted his tax-supported life to eating, drinking, playing cards, and not much else. Toward the end he was so fat that he couldn’t walk. As to Victoria, she was only a dumpy little eighteen-year-old girl, neither well known nor charismatic nor talented.

But when she put on the crown she declared, “I shall be good,” and until her death 64 years later oh boy she was. In fact, the cultural course on which her goodness set England is still known as Victorian. For an example of what that was supposed to mean for the way people acted and spoke and thought, consider this stanza from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s poem “A Psalm of Life”:

Life is real! Life is earnest!
And the grave is not its goal;
Dust thou art, to dust returnest,
Was not spoken of the soul.

People took that as a model idea – or at least they were supposed to take it. Longfellow was an American, but he was so beloved in Queen Victoria’s England that he has a bust in Westminster Abbey’s Poets’ Corner.

But “A Psalm of Life” dates from 1838, just one year into the Victorian era, and by 1895, the year of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, attitudes among the young were changing. Very much included in that change was the idea that life (or anything else) is earnest.

Plus there’s a little code joke here. Talented Wilde wrote his tragedy *Salomé* not in English but in French, and yes he did know the French word *uraniste*, which sounds a little like “earnest” or “Ernest.” It means “gay.”