

Program Notes: *The Importance of Being Earnest*

In addition to being delightful entertainment, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a comedy of manners that examines and makes light of a society obsessed with titles, rank, possessions, and protocols. Here are a few notes that may enrich your viewing experience at today's performance.

Lady Bracknell is the wife of a Viscount (fourth down of five levels of the Peerage), who likely sits in the House of Lords, as is his birthright as eldest son. Although they possess title and position, their wealth is undetermined and perhaps in jeopardy. Marrying their only child, their daughter Gwendolyn, therefore, is critical. Lady Bracknell's list of eligible bachelors is the same as that of the Duchess of Bolton (highest level of the Peerage), which shows her social ambition; fortunately, she is willing to consider Mr. Worthing, if he can satisfy her criteria. A large, stable income derived from investments (rather than work) would be acceptable and preferable to reliance on rental income from his country estate. This was, after all, a period of "agricultural depression," when owning land and great houses was as likely to signal financial liability as it was wealth. (If you watch *Downton Abbey*, you might recall that Earl Grantham married a wealthy American heiress to save his estate.)

During "the Season" from Christmas to mid-June, when Parliament was in session, prominent ladies would host expensive, multi-course dinners that established their place in Society and, hopefully, netted powerful new friendships as well as eligible bachelors. But dinner came late in the day, usually between eight and nine o'clock. To stave off hunger, afternoon tea typically was held at five o'clock. Often a social affair, this refreshment would include tea (not coffee) as well as savory sandwiches, bread and butter, and cake. This should not be confused with "high" tea, which was served at a high (regular) dining table and was the standard evening meal for the working and poorer classes. How tea was poured indicated the quality of the china and, therefore, the wealth of the home. The rich would pour tea first and then add milk because their fine china could withstand high temperatures. For cups and people of lesser quality, milk would be poured first to offset the heat of the tea and, thereby, prevent the cup from breaking. Where you lived also demonstrated your wealth and social standing: Mr. Worthing has the fortune to reside at the well-established The Albany (an actual residence that still exists today), while the Bunburying Algernon has a newer flat in Half Moon Street with electricity!

For a Polite Society filled with so many people of leisure (who would never dream of "working"!), the chief concern was finding ways to occupy themselves while maintaining and better their social standing. Afternoons were filled with dropping off calling cards and paying visits: mid-afternoon for acquaintances and late afternoon (and perhaps tea) for friends. By today's standards, the days began and ended much later: a night at the theatre might begin at 9:00 and then be followed by a light supper at midnight. Many adventurous bachelors might opt for the Empire, not much because of the evening's bill but, rather, for the "special" ladies who frequented the theatre's outdoor promenade. Gentlemen also had their exclusive clubs or might slum with working men at the increasingly popular music halls. For ladies, balls highlighted the season, but most of their evenings likely were spent at dinners and "at homes" with concerts or card games. Of course, all of this was done on lines of credit later resolved by the staff; no respectable person should have to soil himself with "ready money."

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