

= The Importance of Being Earnest =

The Importance of Being Earnest , A Trivial Comedy for Serious People is a play by Oscar Wilde . First performed on 14 February 1895 at the St James 's Theatre in London , it is a farcical comedy in which the protagonists maintain fictitious personæ to escape burdensome social obligations . Working within the social conventions of late Victorian London , the play 's major themes are the triviality with which it treats institutions as serious as marriage , and the resulting satire of Victorian ways . Contemporary reviews all praised the play 's humour , though some were cautious about its explicit lack of social messages , while others foresaw the modern consensus that it was the culmination of Wilde 's artistic career so far . Its high farce and witty dialogue have helped make The Importance of Being Earnest Wilde 's most enduringly popular play .

The successful opening night marked the climax of Wilde 's career but also heralded his downfall . The Marquess of Queensberry , whose son Lord Alfred Douglas was Wilde 's lover , planned to present the writer with a bouquet of rotten vegetables and disrupt the show . Wilde was tipped off and Queensberry was refused admission . Soon afterwards their feud came to a climax in court , where Wilde 's homosexual double life was revealed to the Victorian public and he was eventually sentenced to imprisonment . His notoriety caused the play , despite its early success , to be closed after 86 performances . After his release , he published the play from exile in Paris , but he wrote no further comic or dramatic work .

The Importance of Being Earnest has been revived many times since its premiere . It has been adapted for the cinema on three occasions . In The Importance of Being Earnest ( 1952 ) , Dame Edith Evans reprised her celebrated interpretation of Lady Bracknell ; The Importance of Being Earnest ( 1992 ) by Kurt Baker used an all @-@ black cast ; and Oliver Parker 's The Importance of Being Earnest ( 2002 ) incorporated some of Wilde 's original material cut during the preparation of the original stage production .

= = Composition = =

After the success of Wilde 's plays Lady Windermere 's Fan and A Woman of No Importance , Wilde 's producers urged him to write further plays . In July 1894 he mooted his idea for The Importance of Being Earnest to George Alexander , the actor @-@ manager of the St James 's Theatre . Wilde spent the summer with his family at Worthing , where he wrote the play quickly in August . His fame now at its peak , he used the working title Lady Lancing to avoid pre @-@ emptive speculation of its content . Many names and ideas in the play were borrowed from people or places the author had known ; Lady Queensberry , Lord Alfred Douglas 's mother , for example , lived at Bracknell . There is widespread agreement among Wilde scholars that the most important influence on the play was W. S. Gilbert 's 1877 farce Engaged ; Wilde borrowed from Gilbert not only several incidents but , in Russell Jackson 's phrase " the gravity of tone demanded by Gilbert of his actors " .

Wilde continually revised the text over the next months : no line was left untouched , and " in a play so economical with its language and effects , [ the revisions ] had serious consequences " . Sos Eltis describes Wilde 's revisions as a refined art at work : the earliest , longest handwritten drafts of the play labour over farcical incidents , broad puns , nonsense dialogue and conventional comic turns . In revising as he did , " Wilde transformed standard nonsense into the more systemic and disconcerting illogicality which characterises Earnest 's dialogue " . Richard Ellmann argues that Wilde had reached his artistic maturity and wrote this work more surely and rapidly than before .

Wilde hesitated about submitting the script to Alexander , worrying that it might be unsuitable for the St James 's Theatre , whose typical repertoire was relatively serious , and explaining that it had been written in response to a request for a play " with no real serious interest " . When Henry James 's Guy Domville failed , Alexander turned to Wilde and agreed to put on his play . Alexander began his usual meticulous preparations , interrogating the author on each line and planning stage movements with a toy theatre . In the course of these rehearsals Alexander asked Wilde to shorten the play from four acts to three . Wilde agreed and combined elements of the second and third acts .

The largest cut was the removal of the character of Mr. Gribsby , a solicitor who comes from London to arrest the profligate " Ernest " ( i.e. , Jack ) for his unpaid dining bills . Algernon , who is posing as " Ernest " , will be led away to Holloway Jail unless he settles his accounts immediately . Jack finally agrees to pay for Ernest , everyone thinking that it is Algernon 's bill when in fact it is his own . The four @-@ act version was first played on the radio in a BBC production and is still sometimes performed . Peter Raby argues that the three @-@ act structure is more effective , and that the shorter original text is more theatrically resonant than the expanded published edition .

= = Productions = =

= = = Premiere = = =

The play was first produced at the St James 's Theatre on Valentine 's Day 1895 . It was freezing cold but Wilde arrived dressed in " florid sobriety " , wearing a green carnation . The audience , according to one report , " included many members of the great and good , former cabinet ministers and privy councillors , as well as actors , writers , academics , and enthusiasts " . Allan Aynesworth , who played Algernon Moncrieff , recalled to Hesketh Pearson that " In my fifty @-@ three years of acting , I never remember a greater triumph than [ that ] first night " . Aynesworth was himself " debonair and stylish " , and Alexander , who played Jack Worthing , " demure " .

The cast was :

John Worthing , J.P. ? George Alexander  
Algernon Moncrieff ? Allan Aynesworth  
Rev. Canon Chasuble , D.D. ? H. H. Vincent  
Merriman ? Frank Dyll  
Lane ? F. Kinsey Peile  
Lady Bracknell ? Rose Leclercq  
Hon. Gwendolen Fairfax ? Irene Vanbrugh  
Cecily Cardew ? Evelyn Millard  
Miss Prism ? Mrs. George Canninge

The Marquess of Queensberry , the father of Wilde 's lover Lord Alfred Douglas ( who was on holiday in Algiers at the time ) , had planned to disrupt the play by throwing a bouquet of rotten vegetables at the playwright when he took his bow at the end of the show . Wilde and Alexander learned of the plan , and the latter cancelled Queensberry 's ticket and arranged for policemen to bar his entrance . Nevertheless , he continued harassing Wilde , who eventually launched a private prosecution against the peer for criminal libel , triggering a series of trials ending in Wilde 's imprisonment for gross indecency . Alexander tried , unsuccessfully , to save the production by removing Wilde 's name from the billing , but the play had to close after only 86 performances .

The play 's original Broadway production opened at the Empire Theatre on 22 April 1895 , but closed after sixteen performances . Its cast included William Faversham as Algy , Henry Miller as Jack , Viola Allen as Gwendolen , and Ida Vernon as Lady Bracknell . The Australian premiere was in Melbourne on 10 August 1895 , presented by Dion Boucicault , Jr. and Robert Brough , and the play was an immediate success . Wilde 's downfall in England did not affect the popularity of his plays in Australia .

= = = Critical reception = = =

In contrast to much theatre of the time , The Importance of Being Earnest 's light plot does not tackle serious social and political issues , something of which contemporary reviewers were wary . Though unsure of Wilde 's seriousness as a dramatist , they recognised the play 's cleverness , humour and popularity with audiences . George Bernard Shaw , for example , reviewed the play in the Saturday Review , arguing that comedy should touch as well as amuse , " I go to the theatre to be moved to laughter . " Later in a letter he said , the play , though " extremely funny " , was Wilde 's

" first really heartless [ one ] " . In *The World* , William Archer wrote that he had enjoyed watching the play but found it to be empty of meaning , " What can a poor critic do with a play which raises no principle , whether of art or morals , creates its own canons and conventions , and is nothing but an absolutely wilful expression of an irrepressibly witty personality ? " .

In *The Speaker* , A. B. Walkley admired the play and was one of few to see it as the culmination of Wilde 's dramatic career . He denied the term " farce " was derogatory , or even lacking in seriousness , and said " It is of nonsense all compact , and better nonsense , I think , our stage has not seen . " H. G. Wells , in an unsigned review for the *Pall Mall Gazette* , called *Earnest* one of the freshest comedies of the year , saying " More humorous dealing with theatrical conventions it would be difficult to imagine . " He also questioned whether people would fully see its message , " ... how Serious People will take this Trivial Comedy intended for their learning remains to be seen . No doubt seriously . " The play was so light @-@ hearted that many reviewers compared it to comic opera rather than drama . W. H. Auden later called it " a pure verbal opera " , and *The Times* commented , " The story is almost too preposterous to go without music . " Mary McCarthy , in *Sights and Spectacles* ( 1959 ) , however , and despite thinking the play extremely funny , would call it " a ferocious idyll " ; " depravity is the hero and the only character . "

The Importance of Being Earnest is Wilde 's most popular work and is continually revived . Max Beerbohm called the play Wilde 's " finest , most undeniably his own " , saying that in his other comedies ? *Lady Windermere 's Fan* , *A Woman of No Importance* and *An Ideal Husband* ? the plot , following the manner of Victorien Sardou , is unrelated to the theme of the work , while in *Earnest* the story is " dissolved " into the form of the play .

= = = Revivals = = =

Until after Wilde 's death in 1900 his name remained disgraced , and few discussed , let alone performed , his work in Britain . Alexander revived *The Importance* in a small theatre in Notting Hill , outside the West End , in 1901 ; in the same year he presented the piece on tour , playing Jack Worthing with a cast including the young Lilian Braithwaite as Cecily . The play returned to the West End when Alexander presented a revival at the St James 's in 1902 . Broadway revivals were mounted in 1902 and again in 1910 , each production running for six weeks .

A collected edition of Wilde 's works , published in 1908 and edited by Robert Ross , helped to restore his reputation as an author . Alexander presented another revival of *The Importance* at the St James 's in 1909 , when he and Aynesworth reprised their original roles ; the revival ran for 316 performances . Max Beerbohm said that the play was sure to become a classic of the English repertory , and that its humour was as fresh then as when it had been written , adding that the actors had " worn as well as the play " .

For a 1913 revival at the same theatre the young actors Gerald Ames and A. E. Matthews succeeded the creators as Jack and Algy . John Deverell as Jack and Margaret Scudamore as Lady Bracknell headed the cast in a 1923 production at the Haymarket Theatre . Many revivals in the first decades of the 20th century treated " the present " as the current year . It was not until the 1920s that the case for 1890s costumes was established ; as a critic in *The Manchester Guardian* put it , " Thirty years on , one begins to feel that Wilde should be done in the costume of his period ? that his wit today needs the backing of the atmosphere that gave it life and truth . ? Wilde 's glittering and complex verbal felicities go ill with the shingle and the short skirt . "

In Sir Nigel Playfair 's 1930 production at the Lyric , Hammersmith , John Gielgud played Jack to the Lady Bracknell of his aunt , Mabel Terry @-@ Lewis . Gielgud produced and starred in a production at the Globe ( now the Gielgud ) Theatre in 1939 , in a cast that included Edith Evans as Lady Bracknell , Joyce Carey as Gwendolen , Angela Baddeley as Cecily and Margaret Rutherford as Miss Prism . *The Times* considered the production the best since the original , and praised it for its fidelity to Wilde 's conception , its " airy , responsive ball @-@ playing quality . " Later in the same year Gielgud presented the work again , with Jack Hawkins as Algy , Gwen Ffrangcon @-@ Davies as Gwendolen and Peggy Ashcroft as Cecily , with Evans and Rutherford in their previous roles . The production was presented in several seasons during and after the Second World War , with

mostly the same main players . During a 1946 season at the Haymarket the King and Queen attended a performance , which , as the journalist Geoffrey Wheatcroft put it , gave the play " a final accolade of respectability . " The production toured North America , and was successfully staged on Broadway in 1947 .

As Wilde 's work came to be read and performed again , it was *The Importance of Being Earnest* that received the most productions . By the time of its centenary the journalist Mark Lawson described it as " the second most known and quoted play in English after *Hamlet* . "

For Sir Peter Hall 's 1982 production at the National Theatre the cast included Judi Dench as Lady Bracknell , Martin Jarvis as Jack , Nigel Havers as Algy , Zoë Wanamaker as Gwendolen and Anna Massey as Miss Prism . Nicholas Hytner 's 1993 production at the Aldwych Theatre , starring Maggie Smith , had occasional references to the supposed gay subtext .

In 2005 the Abbey Theatre , Dublin , produced the play with an all @-@ male cast ; it also featured Wilde as a character ? the play opens with him drinking in a Parisian café , dreaming of his play . The Melbourne Theatre Company staged a production in December 2011 with Geoffrey Rush as Lady Bracknell .

In 2011 the Roundabout Theatre Company produced a Broadway revival based on the 2009 Stratford Shakespeare Festival production featuring Brian Bedford as director and as Lady Bracknell . It opened at the American Airlines Theatre on 13 January and ran until 3 July 2011 . The cast also included Dana Ivey as Miss Prism , Paxton Whitehead as Canon Chasuble , Santino Fontana as Algernon , Paul O 'Brien as Lane , Charlotte Parry as Cecily , David Furr as Jack and Sara Topham as Gwendolen . It was nominated for three Tony Awards .

The play was also presented internationally , in Singapore , in October 2004 , by the British Theatre Playhouse , and the same company brought it to London 's Greenwich Theatre in April 2005 .

= = Synopsis = =

The play is set in " The Present " ( i.e. 1895 ) .

= = = Act I = = =

Algernon Moncrieff 's flat in Half Moon Street , W

The play opens with Algernon Moncrieff , an idle young gentleman , receiving his best friend , John Worthing , whom he knows as Ernest . Ernest has come from the country to propose to Algernon 's cousin , Gwendolen Fairfax . Algernon , however , refuses his consent until Ernest explains why his cigarette case bears the inscription , " From little Cecily , with her fondest love to her dear Uncle Jack . " ' Ernest ' is forced to admit to living a double life . In the country , he assumes a serious attitude for the benefit of his young ward , the heiress Cecily Cardew , and goes by the name of John ( or , as a nickname , Jack ) , while pretending that he must worry about a wastrel younger brother named Ernest in London . In the city , meanwhile , he assumes the identity of the libertine Ernest . Algernon confesses a similar deception : he pretends to have an invalid friend named Bunbury in the country , whom he can " visit " whenever he wishes to avoid an unwelcome social obligation . Jack refuses to tell Algernon the location of his country estate .

Gwendolen and her formidable mother Lady Bracknell now call on Algernon who distracts Lady Bracknell in another room while Jack proposes to Gwendolen . She accepts , but seems to love him very largely for his professed name of Ernest . Jack accordingly resolves to himself to be rechristened " Ernest " . Discovering them in this intimate exchange , Lady Bracknell interviews Jack as a prospective suitor . Horrified to learn that he was adopted after being discovered as a baby in a handbag at Victoria Station , she refuses him and forbids further contact with her daughter . Gwendolen , though , manages covertly to promise to him her undying love . As Jack gives her his address in the country , Algernon surreptitiously notes it on the cuff of his sleeve : Jack 's revelation of his pretty and wealthy young ward has motivated his friend to meet her .

= = = Act II = = =

The Garden of the Manor House , Woolton

Cecily is studying with her governess , Miss Prism . Algernon arrives , pretending to be Ernest Worthing , and soon charms Cecily . Long fascinated by Uncle Jack 's hitherto absent black sheep brother , she is predisposed to fall for Algernon in his role of Ernest ( a name she , like Gwendolen , is apparently particularly fond of ) . Therefore , Algernon , too , plans for the rector , Dr. Chasuble , to rechristen him " Ernest " .

Jack , meanwhile , has decided to abandon his double life . He arrives in full mourning and announces his brother 's death in Paris of a severe chill , a story undermined by Algernon 's presence in the guise of Ernest .

Gwendolen now enters , having run away from home . During the temporary absence of the two men , she meets Cecily , each woman indignantly declaring that she is the one engaged to " Ernest " . When Jack and Algernon reappear , their deceptions are exposed .

= = = Act III = = =

Morning @-@ Room at the Manor House , Woolton

Arriving in pursuit of her daughter , Lady Bracknell is astonished to be told that Algernon and Cecily are engaged . The revelation of Cecily 's trust fund soon dispels Lady Bracknell 's initial doubts over the young lady 's suitability , but any engagement is forbidden by her guardian Jack : he will consent only if Lady Bracknell agrees to his own union with Gwendolen ? something she declines to do .

The impasse is broken by the return of Miss Prism , whom Lady Bracknell recognises as the person who , twenty @-@ eight years earlier , as a family nursemaid , had taken a baby boy for a walk in a perambulator ( baby carriage ) and never returned . Challenged , Miss Prism explains that she had absentmindedly put the manuscript of a novel she was writing in the perambulator , and the baby in a handbag , which she had left at Victoria Station . Jack produces the very same handbag , showing that he is the lost baby , the elder son of Lady Bracknell 's late sister , and thus indeed Algernon 's elder brother . Having acquired such respectable relations , he is acceptable as a suitor for Gwendolen after all .

Gwendolen , though , still insists that she can only love a man named Ernest . What is her fiancé 's real first name ? Lady Bracknell informs Jack that , as the first @-@ born , he would have been named after his father , General Moncrieff . Jack examines the army lists and discovers that his father 's name ? and hence his own real name ? was in fact Ernest . Pretence was reality all along . As the happy couples embrace ? Jack and Gwendolen , Algernon and Cecily , and even Dr. Chasuble and Miss Prism ? Lady Bracknell complains to her newfound relative : " My nephew , you seem to be displaying signs of triviality . " " On the contrary , Aunt Augusta " , he replies , " I 've now realised for the first time in my life the vital importance of being Earnest . "

= = Themes = =

= = = Triviality = = =

Arthur Ransome described The Importance ... as the most trivial of Wilde 's society plays , and the only one that produces " that peculiar exhilaration of the spirit by which we recognise the beautiful . " " It is " , he wrote , " precisely because it is consistently trivial that it is not ugly . " Ellmann says that The Importance of Being Earnest touched on many themes Wilde had been building since the 1880s ? the languor of aesthetic poses was well established and Wilde takes it as a starting point for the two protagonists . While Salome , An Ideal Husband and The Picture of Dorian Gray had dwelt on more serious wrongdoing , vice in Earnest is represented by Algy 's craving for cucumber sandwiches . Wilde told Robert Ross that the play 's theme was " That we should treat all trivial things in life very seriously , and all serious things of life with a sincere and studied triviality . " The theme is hinted at in the play 's ironic title , and " earnestness " is repeatedly alluded to in the

dialogue , Algernon says in Act II , " one has to be serious about something if one is to have any amusement in life " but goes on to reproach Jack for ' being serious about everything ' " . Blackmail and corruption had haunted the double lives of Dorian Gray and Sir Robert Chiltern ( in An Ideal Husband ) , but in Earnest the protagonists ' duplicity ( Algernon 's " bunburying " and Worthing 's double life as Jack and Ernest ) is undertaken for more innocent purposes ? largely to avoid unwelcome social obligations . While much theatre of the time tackled serious social and political issues , Earnest is superficially about nothing at all . It " refuses to play the game " of other dramatists of the period , for instance Bernard Shaw , who used their characters to draw audiences to grander ideals .

= = = As a satire of society = = =

The play repeatedly mocks Victorian traditions and social customs , marriage and the pursuit of love in particular . In Victorian times earnestness was considered to be the over @-@ riding societal value , originating in religious attempts to reform the lower classes , it spread to the upper ones too throughout the century . The play 's very title , with its mocking paradox ( serious people are so because they do not see trivial comedies ) , introduces the theme , it continues in the drawing room discussion , " Yes , but you must be serious about it . I hate people who are not serious about meals . It is so shallow of them , " says Algernon in Act 1 ; allusions are quick and from multiple angles .

Wilde managed both to engage with and to mock the genre , while providing social commentary and offering reform . The men follow traditional matrimonial rites , whereby suitors admit their weaknesses to their prospective brides , but the foibles they excuse are ridiculous , and the farce is built on an absurd confusion of a book and a baby . When Jack apologises to Gwendolen during his marriage proposal it is for not being wicked :

JACK : Gwendolen , it is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth . Can you forgive me ?

GWENDOLEN : I can . For I feel that you are sure to change .

In turn , both Gwendolen and Cecily have the ideal of marrying a man named Ernest , a popular and respected name at the time . Gwendolen , quite unlike her mother 's methodical analysis of John Worthing 's suitability as a husband , places her entire faith in a Christian name , declaring in Act I , " The only really safe name is Ernest " . This is an opinion shared by Cecily in Act II , " I pity any poor married woman whose husband is not called Ernest " and they indignantly declare that they have been deceived when they find out the men 's real names .

Wilde embodied society 's rules and rituals artfully into Lady Bracknell : minute attention to the details of her style created a comic effect of assertion by restraint . In contrast to her encyclopaedic knowledge of the social distinctions of London 's street names , Jack 's obscure parentage is subtly evoked . He defends himself against her " A handbag ? " with the clarification , " The Brighton Line " . At the time , Victoria Station consisted of two separate but adjacent terminal stations sharing the same name . To the east was the ramshackle LC & D Railway , on the west the up @-@ market LB & SCR ? the Brighton Line , which went to Worthing , the fashionable , expensive town the gentleman who found baby Jack was travelling to at the time ( and after which Jack was named ) .

= = = Suggested homosexual subtext = = =

It has been argued that the play 's themes of duplicity and ambivalence are inextricably bound up with Wilde 's homosexuality , and that the play exhibits a " flickering presence @-@ absence of ? homosexual desire " . On re @-@ reading the play after his release from prison , Wilde said : " It was extraordinary reading the play over . How I used to toy with that Tiger Life . " As one scholar has put it , the absolute necessity for homosexuals of the period to " need a public mask is a factor contributing to the satire on social disguise . "

The use of the name Earnest may have been a homosexual in @-@ joke . In 1892 , three years before Wilde wrote the play , John Gambril Nicholson had published the book of pederastic poetry Love In Earnest . The sonnet Of Boys ' Names included the verse : " Though Frank may ring like

silver bell / And Cecil softer music claim / They cannot work the miracle / ? ' Tis Ernest sets my heart a @-@ flame . " The word " earnest " may also have been a code @-@ word for homosexual , as in : " Is he earnest ? " , in the same way that " Is he so ? " and " Is he musical ? " were employed .

Sir Donald Sinden , an actor who had met two of the play 's original cast ( Irene Vanbrugh and Allan Aynesworth ) , and Lord Alfred Douglas , wrote to The Times to dispute suggestions that " Earnest " held any sexual connotations :

Although they had ample opportunity , at no time did any of them even hint that " Earnest " was a synonym for homosexual , or that " bunburying " may have implied homosexual sex . The first time I heard it mentioned was in the 1980s and I immediately consulted Sir John Gielgud whose own performance of Jack Worthing in the same play was legendary and whose knowledge of theatrical lore was encyclopaedic . He replied in his ringing tones : " No @-@ No ! Nonsense , absolute nonsense : I would have known " .

A number of theories have also been put forward to explain the derivation of Bunbury , and Bunburying , which are used in the play to imply a secretive double life . It may have derived from Henry Shirley Bunbury , a hypochondriacal acquaintance of Wilde 's youth . Another suggestion , put forward in 1913 by Aleister Crowley , who knew Wilde , was that Bunbury was a combination word : that Wilde had once taken train to Banbury , met a schoolboy there , and arranged a second secret meeting with him at Sunbury .

= = Dramatic analysis = =

= = = Use of language = = =

While Wilde had long been famous for dialogue and his use of language , Raby ( 1988 ) argues that he achieved a unity and mastery in *Earnest* that was unmatched in his other plays , except perhaps *Salomé* . While his earlier comedies suffer from an unevenness resulting from the thematic clash between the trivial and the serious , *Earnest* achieves a pitch @-@ perfect style that allows these to dissolve . There are three different registers detectable in the play . The dandyish insouciance of Jack and Algernon ? established early with Algernon 's exchange with his manservant ? betrays an underlying unity despite their differing attitudes . The formidable pronouncements of Lady Bracknell are as startling for her use of hyperbole and rhetorical extravagance as for her disconcerting opinions . In contrast , the speech of Dr. Chasuble and Miss Prism is distinguished by " pedantic precept " and " idiosyncratic diversion " . Furthermore , the play is full of epigrams and paradoxes . Max Beerbohm described it as littered with " chiselled apophthegms ? witticisms unrelated to action or character " , of which he found half a dozen to be of the highest order .

Lady Bracknell 's line , " A handbag ? " , has been called one of the most malleable in English drama , lending itself to interpretations ranging from incredulous or scandalised to baffled . Edith Evans , both on stage and in the 1952 film , delivered the line loudly in a mixture of horror , incredulity and condescension . Stockard Channing , in the Gaiety Theatre , Dublin in 2010 , hushed the line , in a critic 's words , " with a barely audible ' A handbag ? ' " , rapidly swallowed up with a sharp intake of breath . An understated take , to be sure , but with such a well @-@ known play , packed full of witticisms and aphorisms with a life of their own , it 's the little things that make a difference . "

= = = Characterisation = = =

Though Wilde deployed characters that were by now familiar ? the dandy lord , the overbearing matriarch , the woman with a past , the puritan young lady ? his treatment is subtler than in his earlier comedies . Lady Bracknell , for instance , embodies respectable , upper @-@ class society , but Eltis notes how her development " from the familiar overbearing duchess into a quirkier and more disturbing character " can be traced through Wilde 's revisions of the play . For the two young men , Wilde presents not stereotypical stage " dudes " but intelligent beings who , as Jackson puts it

, " speak like their creator in well @-@ formed complete sentences and rarely use slang or vogue @-@ words " . Dr Chasuble and Miss Prism are characterised by a few light touches of detail , their old @-@ fashioned enthusiasms , and the Canon 's fastidious pedantry , pared down by Wilde during his many redrafts of the text .

= = = Structure and genre = = =

Ransome argues that Wilde freed himself by abandoning the melodrama , the basic structure which underlies his earlier social comedies , and basing the story entirely on the Earnest / Ernest verbal conceit . Now freed from " living up to any drama more serious than conversation " Wilde could now amuse himself to a fuller extent with quips , bons @-@ mots , epigrams and repartee that really had little to do with the business at hand .

The genre of the Importance of Being Earnest has been deeply debated by scholars and critics alike who have placed the play within a wide variety of genres ranging from parody to satire . In his critique of Wilde , Foster argues that the play creates a world where ? real values are inverted [ and ] , reason and unreason are interchanged " . Similarly , Wilde 's use of dialogue mocks the upper classes of Victorian England lending the play a satirical tone . Reinhart further stipulates that the use of farcical humour to mock the upper classes " merits the play both as satire and as drama " .

= = Publication = =

= = = First edition = = =

Wilde 's two final comedies , An Ideal Husband and The Importance of Being Earnest , were still on stage in London at the time of his prosecution , and they were soon closed as the details of his case became public . After two years in prison with hard labour , Wilde went into exile in Paris , sick and depressed , his reputation destroyed in England . In 1898 , when no @-@ one else would , Leonard Smithers agreed with Wilde to publish the two final plays . Wilde proved to be a diligent reviser , sending detailed instructions on stage directions , character listings and the presentation of the book , and insisting that a playbill from the first performance be reproduced inside . Ellmann argues that the proofs show a man " very much in command of himself and of the play " . Wilde 's name did not appear on the cover , it was " By the Author of Lady Windermere 's Fan " . His return to work was brief though , as he refused to write anything else , " I can write , but have lost the joy of writing " .

On 19 October 2007 , a first edition ( number 349 of 1 @,@ 000 ) was discovered inside a handbag in an Oxfam shop in Nantwich , Cheshire . Staff were unable to trace the donor . It was sold for £ 650 .

= = = In translation = = =

The Importance of Being Earnest 's popularity has meant it has been translated into many languages , though the homophonous pun in the title ( " Ernest " , a masculine proper name , and " earnest " , the virtue of steadfastness and seriousness ) poses a special problem for translators . The easiest case of a suitable translation of the pun , perpetuating its sense and meaning , may have been its translation into German . Since English and German are closely related languages , German provides an equivalent adjective ( " ernst " ) and also a matching masculine proper name ( " Ernst " ) . The meaning and tenor of the wordplay are exactly the same . Yet there are many different possible titles in German , mostly concerning sentence structure . The two most common ones are " Bunbury oder ernst / Ernst sein ist alles " and " Bunbury oder wie wichtig es ist , ernst / Ernst zu sein " . In a study of Italian translations , Adrian Pablé found thirteen different versions using eight titles . Since wordplay is often unique to the language in question , translators are faced with a choice of either staying faithful to the original ? in this case the English adjective and virtue earnest ? or creating a similar pun in their own language .



Four main strategies have been used by translators . The first leaves all characters ' names unchanged and in their original spelling : thus the name is respected and readers reminded of the original cultural setting , but the liveliness of the pun is lost . Eva Malagoli varied this source @-@ oriented approach by using both the English Christian names and the adjective earnest , thus preserving the pun and the English character of the play , but possibly straining an Italian reader . A third group of translators replaced Ernest with a name that also represents a virtue in the target language , favouring transparency for readers in translation over fidelity to the original . For instance , in Italian , these versions variously call the play *L'importanza di essere Franco / Severo / Fedele* , the given names being respectively the values of honesty , propriety , and loyalty . French offers a closer pun : " Constant " is both a first name and the quality of steadfastness , so the play is commonly known as *De l'importance d'être Constant* , though Jean Anouilh translated the play under the title : *Il est important d'être Aimé* ( " Aimé " is a name which also means " beloved " ) . These translators differ in their attitude to the original English honorific titles , some change them all , or none , but most leave a mix partially as a compensation for the added loss of Englishness . Lastly , one translation gave the name an Italianate touch by rendering it as Ernesto ; this work liberally mixed proper nouns from both languages .

= = Adaptations = =

= = = Film = = =

Apart from multiple " made @-@ for @-@ television " versions , *The Importance of Being Earnest* has been adapted for the English @-@ language cinema at least three times , first in 1952 by Anthony Asquith who adapted the screenplay and directed it . Michael Denison ( Algernon ) , Michael Redgrave ( Jack ) , Edith Evans ( Lady Bracknell ) , Dorothy Tutin ( Cecily ) , Joan Greenwood ( Gwendolen ) , and Margaret Rutherford ( Miss Prism ) and Miles Malleon ( Canon Chasuble ) were among the cast . In 1992 Kurt Baker directed a version using an all @-@ black cast with Daryl Keith Roach as Jack , Wren T. Brown as Algernon , Ann Weldon as Lady Bracknell , Lanei Chapman as Cecily , Chris Calloway as Gwendolen , CCH Pounder as Miss Prism , and Brock Peters as Doctor Chasuble , set in the United States . Oliver Parker , an English director who had previously adapted *An Ideal Husband* by Wilde , made the 2002 film ; it stars Colin Firth ( Jack ) , Rupert Everett ( Algy ) , Judi Dench ( Lady Bracknell ) , Reese Witherspoon ( Cecily ) , Frances O'Connor ( Gwendolen ) , Anna Massey ( Miss Prism ) , and Tom Wilkinson ( Canon Chasuble ) . Parker 's adaptation includes the dunning solicitor Mr. Gribbsby who pursues Jack to Hertfordshire ( present in Wilde 's original draft , but cut at the behest of the play 's first producer ) . Algernon too is pursued by a group of creditors in the opening scene .

= = = Operas and musicals = = =

In 1960 , *Ernest in Love* was staged Off @-@ Broadway . The Japanese all @-@ female musical theatre troupe Takarazuka Revue staged this musical in 2005 in two productions , one by Moon Troupe and the other one by Flower Troupe .

In 1963 , Erik Chisholm composed an opera from the play , using Wilde 's text as the libretto .

In 1964 , Gerd Natschinski composed the musical *Mein Freund Bunbury* based on the play , 1964 premiered at Metropol Theater Berlin .

According to a study by Robert Tanitch , by 2002 there had been least eight adaptations of the play as a musical , though " never with conspicuous success " . The earliest such version was a 1927 American show entitled *Oh Earnest* . The journalist Mark Bostridge comments , " The libretto of a 1957 musical adaptation , *Half in Earnest* , deposited in the British Library , is scarcely more encouraging . The curtain rises on Algy strumming away at the piano , singing ' I can play Chopsticks , Lane ' . Other songs include ? almost predictably ? ' A Bunburying I Must Go ' . "

Gerald Barry created the 2011 opera , *The Importance of Being Earnest* , commissioned by the Los

Angeles Philharmonic and the Barbican Centre in London . It was premiered in Los Angeles in 2011 . The stage premiere was given by the Opéra national de Lorraine in Nancy , France in 2013 .

= = = Radio and television = = =

There have been many radio versions of the play . In 1925 the BBC broadcast an adaptation with Hesketh Pearson as Jack Worthing . Further broadcasts of the play followed in 1927 and 1936 . In 1977 , BBC Radio 4 broadcast the four @-@ act version of the play , with Fabia Drake as Lady Bracknell , Richard Pasco as Jack , Jeremy Clyde as Algy , Maurice Denham as Canon Chasuble , Sylvia Coleridge as Miss Prism , Barbara Leigh @-@ Hunt as Gwendolen and Prunella Scales as Cecily . The production was later released on CD .

To commemorate the centenary of the first performance of the play , Radio 4 broadcast a new adaptation on 13 February 1995 ; directed by Glyn Dearman , it featured Judi Dench as Lady Bracknell , Michael Hordern as Lane , Michael Sheen as Jack Worthing , Martin Clunes as Algernon Moncrieff , John Moffatt as Canon Chasuble , Miriam Margolyes as Miss Prism , Samantha Bond as Gwendolen and Amanda Root as Cecily . The production was later issued on audio cassette .

On 13 December 2000 , BBC Radio 3 broadcast a new adaptation directed by Howard Davies starring Geraldine McEwan as Lady Bracknell , Simon Russell Beale as Jack Worthing , Julian Wadham as Algernon Moncrieff , Geoffrey Palmer as Canon Chasuble , Celia Imrie as Miss Prism , Victoria Hamilton as Gwendolen and Emma Fielding as Cecily , with music composed by Dominic Muldowney . The production was released on audio cassette .

A 1964 commercial television adaptation starred Ian Carmichael , Patrick Macnee , Susannah York , Fenella Fielding , Pamela Brown and Irene Handl .

BBC television transmissions of the play have included a 1974 Play of the Month version starring Coral Browne as Lady Bracknell with Michael Jayston , Julian Holloway , Gemma Jones and Celia Bannerman . Stuart Burge directed another adaptation in 1986 with a cast including Gemma Jones , Alec McCowen , Paul McGann and Joan Plowright .

It was adapted for Australian TV in 1957 .

= = = Commercial recordings = = =

Gielgud 's performance is preserved on an EMI audio recording dating from 1952 , which also captures Edith Evans 's Lady Bracknell . The cast also includes Roland Culver ( Algy ) , Jean Cadell ( Miss Prism ) , Pamela Brown ( Gwendolen ) and Celia Johnson ( Cecily ) .

Other audio recordings include a " Theatre Masterworks " version from 1953 , directed and narrated by Margaret Webster , with a cast including Maurice Evans , Lucile Watson and Mildred Natwick ; a 1989 version by California Artists Radio Theatre , featuring Dan O 'Herlihy Jeanette Nolan , Les Tremayne and Richard Erdman ; and one by L.A. Theatre Works issued in 2009 , featuring Charles Busch , James Marsters and Andrea Bowen .