

Etiquette, Money and High Society in *The Importance of Being Earnest*

Bankruptcy Court

It was not uncommon for gentlemen to fall into bankruptcy, as they depended much on credit and on eventualities that might be thwarted (inheritance not coming through or not being substantial enough to cover the debt, etc.). For the upper class, those who ended up bankrupt had probably lived in lavish style (perfectly tailored suits, ornate furniture, and elaborate dinners led to staggering charges), and so those entering the Court earned a reputation of being fashionable. Thus, while the middle class fought tooth and nail against debt and loss of position, for the upper class, it was just another day, another dollar (well, pound, shilling, what you will) gone down the tube. Wilde himself lived largely on credit and was declared bankrupt soon after the opening of *Earnest* (on account of the infamous trials, as the show itself had been a success).

“Half of the chaps who get into the Bankruptcy Court are called Algernon.” (Algernon, 50)

call on

Most upper class women filled their afternoons with calls; that is, paying visits to various acquaintances. These visits were governed by the strictest rules of etiquette, and were accompanied by the intricate business of leaving cards. Typically, these calls (known as morning calls) would be made between about three and six, ranging from more to less formal (that is, beginning with formal acquaintances and progressing to close friends and relatives), and would last about fifteen minutes. Ladies would arrange to spend particular days receiving, waiting at home for guests rather than running out to meet others. Those who arrived might be offered a cup of tea or, if it was nearing five o’ clock, might be invited to stay for the slight refreshment known as tea. In the country, hostesses invariably provided a bit of food, assuming that traveling visitors required sustenance. Men were not restricted from paying calls, but were far less involved than were their feminine counterparts.

“...I was obliged to call on dear Lady Harbury.” (Lady Bracknell, 11)

card

When members of high society paid brief visits known as calls, they left cards in accordance with elaborate rules of etiquette. These cards helped households to keep track of their guests, as well as the cards and calls that they must return. Every lady would have a card of her own, while a daughter would share her mother’s cards until marrying or

entering her mid-twenties. A young man might have cards of his own much earlier, as he was expected to venture into society alone at an earlier age. A gentleman or lady with a profession might well have one card for business, another for social visits. None of these cards were meant to be overly elaborate, and they were to be printed following carefully-specified formats.

“You, I see from your card, are Uncle Jack’s brother, my cousin Earnest, my wicked cousin Earnest.” (Cecily, 33)

cucumber sandwiches

A typical of upper-class teas, recommended particularly for the summer. These are what they seem: very thin cucumber slices, often soaked in vinegar and dressing, salted and peppered, and placed between thinly sliced buttered bread (with the crusts removed).
[recipes, picture]

“...have you got the cucumber sandwiches cut for Lady Bracknell?” (Algernon, 1)

flirt with their husbands

Victorian codes of conduct tolerated no public displays of affection, whether among the married or unmarried. Better to keep all such affection out of the public eye, in keeping with decorum and the fashion of facades.

“The amount of women in London who flirt with their own husbands is perfectly scandalous.” (Algernon, 9)

mercenary marriages

Upper class marriage at this time rarely hinged on earnest affection (in fact, love could well be an entirely alien concept). Greater priority was placed on finding a mate of the proper social sphere (preferably of one’s own or higher), with suitable moral qualifications and polished manners, perhaps a title, and preferably with money. Marrying into money saved many a bachelor who had fallen into debt (Wilde included), and could provide a young woman with a stable future. According to society’s rule, a man must receive permission from a girl’s parents (meaning that he must suit their sensibilities) before marrying; to do otherwise would be to run headlong into scandal. Given the power of the parents to decide, it was rare for a young woman to choose a husband of her own; often, she would be half thrust upon him during the dizzying season and not given a chance for private conference with the man.

“But I do not approve of mercenary marriages.” (Lady Bracknell, 73)

nobody knew her

The double meaning suggests that Lady Lancing was cut from society owing to her transformed behavior at the hands of the French maid. The French and their ways (see corrupt French drama) were held to be vulgar, their women loose. Any member of English society who began to behave according to variant standards (those of the French certainly included) was swiftly severed from respectable households and would find him or herself barred utterly from society (for Wilde's treatment of this, see Mrs. Erlynne in *Lady Windermere's Fan*). This was "cutting" someone, or not "knowing" them.

"And after six months nobody knew her." (Jack, 72)

only eighteen

Cecily is the precise age to "come out" as a society debutante. During the season, 18-year-olds were introduced as marriage material for suitable men.

"Well, I am really only eighteen, but I always admit to twenty when I go to evening parties." (Cecily, 74)

put my table completely out

In arranging a dinner, a hostess was expected to arrange seats in an order that would best facilitate conversation and satisfactory interactions. Invitations were extended with a mind to a good mix and balance, both of number and quality of guests; in backing out, Algy would throw off both. Of course, Wilde's wonderful exaggeration of the importance of form over function means that Lady Bracknell would banish Lord Bracknell to his room rather than unbalance the harmony of her table.

"It would put my table completely out." (Lady Bracknell, 13)

season

Referring to the London social season. From May through July, the elite of London gathered for an intense rush of socialization aimed largely at establishing connections and matching up eligible men and women. The season included daily receptions ranging from luncheons to endless streams of calls, to full-blown, almost ostentatiously ornate balls (and that doesn't include such events as the Henley Royal Regatta). Upper class families who lived in the country kept houses in London and so were able to dwell in the city during the season. Every household was expected to provide entertainment and welcome guests in some capacity, and would be judged based on their arrangements, closely scrutinized by alert guests.

“It is my last reception one wants something that will encourage conversation, particularly at the end of the season when everyone has practically said whatever they had to ...” (Lady Bracknell, 13)

semi-recumbent

indicates one who is sprawled, leaning back. While etiquette rules dictated that women remain still and upright (a posture aided or enforced by their rigid corseting and elaborate dresses), men were allowed some freedom to sit with looser posture. Jack manages to carry even this privilege too far, however.

“Rise, sir, from this semi-recumbent posture.” (Lady Bracknell, 17)

sent down

Governed by strict rules of etiquette, the very act of sitting down to dinner became a laborious and highly ritualized chore. Guests were expected to enter the room in a carefully specified order, with those of greatest importance entering first.

“[W]henver I do dine there I am always treated as a member of the family, and sent down with either no woman at all, or two.” (Algernon, 9)

slight refreshment at five o’clock

Tea: light meal, almost a snack, including a cup of tea and food such as muffins and light sandwiches - was typically taken around five o’ clock. It served a largely social function, and ladies in particular would often send invitations and make of tea a formal gathering. The Victorian upper class typically took breakfast around ten, luncheon around one, and tea around five. Tea would fortify the diner until dinner, which would be held around seven; supper could come even as late as midnight. These meals could extend for hours, and so it would not be unusual to find an English gentleman spending a fair amount of his time eating.

“I believe it is customary in good society to take some slight refreshment at five o’ clock.” (Algernon, 3)

smoking room

Though not forbidden, smoking was frowned upon, particularly in the presence of ladies. Any trace of the smell could elicit an unfavorable response from well-to-do ladies (in order to keep the offending smell off of their clothing, men typically wore smoking jackets while partaking), and Queen Victoria herself famously detested the habit. As such, specific rooms were set aside for smoking, whether at home or in a club or restaurant.

Furthermore, any man passing a lady was supposed to take his cigarette from his mouth. Following the opening of Lady Windermere's Fan, Wilde raised eyebrows and hackles when he appeared nonchalantly smoking a cigarette while addressing the audience.

"Bring me that cigarette case Mr. Worthing left in the smoking room the last time he dined here." (Algernon, 5)

utilitarian

Indicates an action that has practical value. Most any practical work would have been vile to the upper class; ladies in particular were considered far too dainty to undertake such labor. As suits her job as governess, Miss Prism is effectively teaching Cecily the difference between the suitable occupation of a workman and of a lady: a lady must never do anything useful. Wilde himself tended to flout practicality, for beauty is (or was, for Wilde) often anything but practical. While the utilitarian emphasizes use over beauty, the upper class lady was to emphasize beauty over use. Moulton is, as specified in an earlier version of the script, the gardener.

"Surely such a utilitarian occupation as the watering of flowers is rather Moulton's duty than yours." (Miss Prism, 29)

MONEY

between seven and eight thousand

Jack informs Lady Bracknell that his annual income is between £7,000 and £8,000, chiefly from investments. This (equal to about 600,000 today, or nearly \$1.5million) would probably be from the same Funds (fairly conservative government securities) that Cecily's inheritance is invested in, making his income the 3-4% thrown off from a principal of over £200,000 (probably well over \$20million today). Not to mention what he gets from his land, and rent on his flat on Belgrave Square.

"Between seven and eight thousand a year." (Jack, 19)

the Funds

Investments backed by the Bank of England. Representing a reliable store of wealth, they were government bonds that gave a low yield of interest but were conservative and safe—effectively the equivalent of Treasury bills. Worth more, in many ways, than land, as the value of land (in rents and such) could (and did) plummet without warning and was often entailed to prevent selling it anyway (many of the nobles and gentry were finding

themselves hurting badly for money, though they owned plenty of land). [see also agricultural depression, purple of commerce, and hundred and thirty thousand]

“Oh! about a hundred and thirty thousand pounds in the Funds.” (Jack, 72)

a hundred and thirty thousand

Cecily’s “fortune,” which was the term for one’s inherited or banked capital, not one’s actual or annual income, is quite considerable—the equivalent of anywhere from £10 to 13 million (currently double that in dollars). It puts her in the upper tier economically, and invested in the Funds (a stable if conservative investment similar to Treasury bills) could be relied on to earn about 3-4% annually and generate a tidy annuity. Obviously, not a sum to sniff haughtily at. Cecily is better endowed than CENTERSTAGE.

“Oh! about a hundred and thirty thousand pounds in the Funds.” (Jack, 72)

land or investments

Many upper class families did hold much stake in land, but over the course of the 19th Century the actual monetary benefit from country property (drawn from a combination of rents paid by tenants, income earned from the sale of farm produce or collection of timber or other resources, etc.) could be shockingly slight, particularly with the coming of England’s agricultural depression. As the mercantile classes made all the money, the landed gentry remained rich in acreage and status, but became increasingly cash poor. [see also entries for Funds and purple of commerce]

“In land, or in investments.” (Lady Bracknell, 19)

let by the year

Merely another way of saying “rented on an annual basis.” An underlying irony here is that Jack, who has money but no title, owns the property and serves as landlord for a member of the titled aristocracy.

“Well, I own a house in Belgrave Square, but it is let by the year to Lady Bloxham.” (Jack, 19)

purple of commerce

A comical inversion of expectations, purple being historically associated with aristocracy, if not royalty, while one would rise from the ranks of commerce. Bracknell, or Wilde, may be subtly acknowledging the growing reversal of position, in which wealth in the

form of capital was accumulating among the commercial classes—while the aristocracy increasingly had to marry into money.

“Was he born in what the Radical papers call the purple of commerce, or did he rise from the ranks of the aristocracy?” (Lady Bracknell, 20)

ready money

Young bachelors from wealthy families often lived largely on credit, presuming that they would one day come into money (through inheritance or marriage, for instance) and thus be rid of their debts. Creditors were equally ready to believe this, thereby retaining more fashionable customers. Because of this honesty system, buying on credit came in part (rightly or not) to indicate an upstanding character. As early as his Oxford years, Wilde fell into the pitfall of overusing credit (all in the name of beauty, of course, as he required the proper decorations for his rooms); it was a habit he would never discard.

“No, sir. Not even for ready money.” (Lane, 12)

“Glossary.” Digital Dramaturgy. Centerstage.org. Updated October 4, 2009. Web. 12.29.2011.