

## Names and Titles in *The Importance of Being Earnest*

### **Jack Worthing, J.P.:**

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**Jack** – Short for John, as noted in the script (“a notorious domesticity”); not only one of the most common of English names but connoting a certain solid middle-class respectability.

**Worthing** – Name taken from a popular and elegant seaside resort of the period, located on the English coast in West Sussex. An easy jaunt from London via the Brighton line, by the late 1800s Worthing was growing ever more popular with a wider range of visitors. In 1890, Worthing had been designated a royal Borough. Wilde wrote *The Importance of Being Earnest* while staying in Worthing.

**J.P.** - Justice of the Peace. The position was given to an upper-class country gentleman and involved the administration of justice on a local level, chiefly dealing with minor infractions (though the post had once entailed a broader range of duties, many had been cut through reforms in the judicial and political system). Intensive legal training or knowledge was not necessary or expected in obtaining the post of J.P., as it was given based on land ownership and position in the community.

### **Algernon Moncrieff:**

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**Algernon** – English name, particularly upper class and of the period, derived from an old French term for “mustached” or “whiskered.” Its French origins subtly indicate class (however immoral the French may have seemed, they had long held an association in England with royalty), rooted as far back as the Norman invasion. May (or may not) be a veiled allusion to Algernon Charles Swinburne, the notoriously decadent Pre-Raphaelite (only just Wilde’s senior) whose career as poet, critic, and dramatist and radically dissipated youth presaged Wilde’s own.

**Moncrieff** – A traditional Scottish family name dating to the 1200s, it originated in the area around Perth, and is thought to have some family connection to King Duncan (of *Macbeth* fame). Sir Thomas Moncreiffe was Clerk of the Exchequer and Treasury during the reigns of Charles II, James VII, and II, and William and Mary. Sir Thomas bought land and became first in a line of baronets inheriting the family estate.

### **Lady Bracknell:**

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**Lady** – Title taken according to the English peerage system, which separates the aristocracy and landed gentry into ranks. Titles among the aristocracy pass to the eldest son, and so keep within the family line (e.g., Gwendolen’s brother, Gerald—assuming

that she has no other brothers—would become Lord Bracknell when his father died). The highest non-royal rank is that of a duke, followed by marquess, earl, viscount, and baron. Below that, titles were not hereditary. Different terms of address would be used for each rank, and their wives and children would also be addressed accordingly. Given his designation, the fact that his wife is called “Lady,” and the fact that his daughter bears the title “Honourable,” it would appear that Lord Bracknell is a Baron.

**Bracknell** – Town located in Berkshire, to the west of London. The name may mean “the nook or secret place of Bracca.” Or (as suggested by the site of the town’s council) it may mean “bracken-covered secret place.” Or it could relate to the Old English bracan for “to break” (or how about braccas for breeches?).

### **Hon. Gwendolen Fairfax:**

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**Hon.** - Actually not an indication that the young lady comes from Hampden, it’s short for “Honourable.” This is Gwendolen’s honorary designation by virtue of her father’s title; the daughters of viscounts and barons [see Lady, above] were allowed the designation “Honourable,” though it was never used in direct address or used on the cards for paying calls.

**Gwendolen** – Welsh name meaning “white (or blessed) ring,” a variant spelling of Gwendolyn. In his *History of the Kings of Briton*, Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote of a Queen Gwendolen who was abandoned by her husband, the king, for another woman. In response, she raised a rebellion that led to her husband’s death, seized control of the kingdom, ordered the offending woman drowned, and went on to reign for fifteen years. No pushover.

**Fairfax** – From the Old English for “fair-haired” or “lovely tresses” (fæger + feax).

### **Lane, a manservant:**

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**Lane** – According to Richard Ellmann’s biography of Wilde, the manservant was named for Wilde’s publisher John Lane (1854-1925), who published *A Woman of No Importance* and *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, among other works.

**manservant** – Typically, well-to-do bachelors kept manservants to handle or help with their daily tasks, from general housekeeping to cooking to waiting on guests. A manservant would be referred to by his surname only. Those who kept a manservant were obligated to pay a luxury tax. Perhaps the most famous character of the type is P.G. Wodehouse’s Jeeves (whose esteemed-if-feckless master lived, like Algernon, on Half-Moon Street).

### **Cecily Cardew:**

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**Cecily** – From Cecilia, which likely stemmed from a name rooted in the Latin caecus, for “blind.” In Catholicism, see also Saint Cecilia, the patron saint of music who led many to baptism and faith, and was martyred for her unbending piety. The high-born Cecilia convinced her husband to be baptized and accept God rather than despoil her virginity. Having been baptized, her husband convinced his brother, and the conversions continued from there.

**Cardew** – An alternate of the ancient name Carew, meaning “black fort.” May also be linked to a term related to wool manufacture (“carding” involved separating and straightening strands of wool), emphasizing Cardew’s background in trade.

### **Laetitia Prism, a governess:**

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**Laetitia** – Latin for “joy” or “happiness.”

**Prism** – A prism distorts or reconfigures anything that passes through its surface, breaking light into bands of color. The word itself comes from the Greek for “something that has been sawn.”

**governess** – The position of governess was one of the few more genteel occupations available at the time to unmarried women, be they older or younger. A governess often lived with wealthy families and offered a private education, teaching younger children of both sexes and then young women alone after the boys had gone off to “public” (private) school. Governesses were in many ways surrogate mothers, often spending more time with children than did the biological parents (or taking their place when they were dead), instructing them in educational topics but also preparing them for life and serving as companions. This could be a very desirable position, and in the case of large families might last for many years.

### **Canon Frederick Chasuble, D.D.:**

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**Canon** – In the Church of England, a clergyman with duties connected to the cathedral (this included leading mass, among other responsibilities).

**Frederick** – Name of German origin, meaning “peaceful ruler.” May be a reference to Frederic Nietzsche and his German skepticism, or perhaps a glancing reference to Frederick III of Germany, who married Victoria (the queen’s daughter) in 1858.

**Chasuble** – Somewhat ironically for an Anglican clergyman, his name is that of the principal vestment of Roman Catholic priests for the celebration of mass, the over/outer

garment. It may in part reflect a lifelong fascination with Catholicism on Wilde's part, fashionable at the time, and potentially part of the university milieu in which Canon Chasuble may have been educated (under the influence of leading figures like Cardinal Newman and others).

**D.D.** – Doctor of Divinity. Such a degree would have been obtained from studies at a leading university, perhaps at Oxford or Cambridge—often the pursuit of academically capable younger sons of the aristocracy (who would not inherit) or those from families without personal wealth. A pathway to a respectable and secure, if modest, living. Indication of an educated man but not necessarily one of great religious conviction.

**Merriman, a butler:**

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**Merriman** – According to Ellmann's biography of Wilde, the butler was originally to be called Mathews, after publisher Elkin Mathews, who worked with John Lane (see Lane, above). "Merriman" may also be a wry pun.

**butler** – The presence of a butler, that indispensably useful servant, indicated significant wealth and status: a household with a butler almost invariably kept numerous other servants, of whom the butler was the effective head. Indeed, in households having a great many servants, these kept to a tiered structure of their own, almost another version of the class scale. Privy to many of a household's secrets, butlers were noted for being infinitely discreet. There have been many fictional treatments of butlers, who seem to be the favorite character type of some mystery writers. For pretty accurate representations of the butler within the microcosm of the English home, see *Upstairs, Downstairs*; *The Remains of the Day*; or *Gosford Park*.

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