

FIRST ACT

Morning-room of Lord Windermere's house in Carlton House Terrace. [Doors C. and R. Bureau with books and papers R. Sofa with small tea-table L. Window opening on to terrace L. Table R.]

[Enter the DUCHESS OF BERWICK and LADY AGATHA CARLISLE C.
Exit PARKER C.]

DUCHESS OF BERWICK [coming down C., and shaking hands]: Dear Margaret, I am so pleased to see you. You remember Agatha, don't you? [Crossing L.C.] How do you do, Lord Darlington? I won't let you know my daughter, you are far too wicked.

LORD DARLINGTON: Don't say that, Duchess. As a wicked man I am a complete failure. Why, there are lots of people who say I have never really done anything wrong in the whole course of my life. Of course they only say it behind my back.

DUCHESS OF BERWICK: Isn't he dreadful? Agatha, this is Lord Darlington. Mind you don't believe a word he says. [LORD DARLINGTON crosses R.C.] No, no tea, thank you, dear. [Crosses and sits on sofa.] We have just had tea at Lady Markby's. Such bad tea, too. It was quite undrinkable. I wasn't at all surprised. Her own son-in-law supplies it. Agatha is looking forward so much to your ball tonight, dear Margaret.

LADY WINDERMERE [seated L.C.]: Oh, you mustn't think it is going to be a ball, Duchess. It is only a dance in honour of my birthday. A small and early.

LORD DARLINGTON [standing L.C.]: Very small, very early, and very select, Duchess.

DUCHESS OF BERWICK [on sofa L.]: Of course it's going to be select. But we know that, dear Margaret, about your house. It is really one of the few houses in London where I can take Agatha, and where I feel perfectly secure about dear Berwick. I don't know what society is coming to. The most dreadful people seem to go everywhere. They certainly come to my parties – the men get quite furious if one doesn't ask them. Really, someone should make a stand against it.

LADY WINDERMERE: I will, Duchess. I will have no one in my house about whom there is any scandal.

LORD DARLINGTON [R.C.]: Oh, don't say that, Lady Windermere. I should never be admitted! [Sitting.]

DUCHESS OF BERWICK: Oh, men don't matter. With women it is different. We're good. Some of us are, at least. But we are positively getting elbowed into the corner. Our husbands would really forget

our existence if we didn't nag at them from time to time, just to remind them that we have a perfect legal right to do so.

LORD DARLINGTON: It's a curious thing, Duchess, about the game of marriage – a game, by the way, that is going out of fashion – the wives hold all the honours, and invariably lose the odd trick.

DUCHESS OF BERWICK: The odd trick? Is that the husband, Lord Darlington?

LORD DARLINGTON: It would be rather a good name for the modern husband.

DUCHESS OF BERWICK: Dear Lord Darlington, how thoroughly deprived you are!

LADY WINDERMERE: Lord Darlington is trivial.

LORD DARLINGTON: Ah, don't say that, Lady Windermere.

LADY WINDERMERE: Why do you talk so trivially about life, then? LORD DARLINGTON: Because I think that life is far too important a thing ever to talk seriously about it. [Moves up C.]

DUCHESS OF BERWICK: What does he mean? Do, as a concession to my poor wits, Lord Darlington, just explain to me what you really mean.

LORD DARLINGTON [coming down back of table]: I think I had better not, Duchess. Nowadays to be intelligible is to be found out.

Good-bye! [Shakes hands with DUCHESS.] And now – [goes up stage] – Lady Windermere, good-bye. I may come tonight, mayn't I? Do let me come.

LADY WINDERMERE [standing up stage with LORD DARLINGTON]: Yes, certainly. But you are not to say foolish, insincere things to people.

LORD DARLINGTON [smiling]: Ah! you are beginning to reform me. It is a dangerous thing to reform anyone, Lady Windermere. [Bows, and exit C.]

DUCHESS OF BERWICK [who has risen, goes C.]: What a charming, wicked creature! I like him so much. I'm quite delighted he's gone! How sweet you're looking! Where do you get your gowns? And now I must tell you how sorry I am for you, dear Margaret. [Crosses to sofa and sits with LADY WINDERMERE.] Agatha, darling!

LADY AGATHA: Yes, mamma. [Rises.]

DUCHESS OF BERWICK: Will you go and look over the photograph album that I see there?

LADY AGATHA: Yes, mamma. [Rises.]

The art of conversation

Chattering classes

The rules for verbal exchanges are surprisingly enduring

The principle that it is rude to interrupt another speaker goes back at least to Cicero, writing in 44BC, who said that good conversation required "alternation" among participants. In his essay "On Duties", Cicero remarked that nobody, to his knowledge, had yet set down the rules for ordinary conversation, though many had done so for public speaking. He had a shot at it himself, and quickly arrived at the sort of list that self-help authors have been echoing ever since. The rules we learn from Cicero are these: speak clearly; speak easily but not too much, especially when others want their turn; do not interrupt; be courteous; deal seriously with serious matters and gracefully with lighter ones; never criticise people behind their backs; stick to subjects of general interest; do not talk about yourself; and, above all, never lose your temper.

Probably only two cardinal rules were lacking from Cicero's list: remember people's names, and be a good listener. Each of these pieces of advice also has a long pedigree. At a pinch you might trace the point about names back to Plato. Both found a persuasive modern advocate in Dale Carnegie, a teacher of public speaking who decided in 1936 that Americans needed educating more broadly in "the fine art of getting along". His book "How to Win Friends and Influence People" is still in print 70 years later and has sold 15m copies. To remember names, and to listen well, are two of Carnegie's "six ways to make people like you". The others are to become genuinely interested in other people; smile; talk in terms of the other person's interests; and make the other person feel important.

Cicero's rules of conversation seem to have been fairly common across cultures as well as time, if varying in strictness. It might reasonably be said that Italians are more tolerant of interruption, Americans of contradiction and the English of formality, for example. These rules of conversation also intersect with those of politeness more generally, as formulated by two American linguists, Penelope Brown and Steven Levinson, the pioneers of "politeness theory".

Courtesy counts

The Brown and Levinson model says, roughly speaking, that Person A probably does not want to be rude to Person B, but in the way of things, life may sometimes require Person A to contradict or intrude on Person B, and when that happens, Person A has a range of "politeness strategies" to draw on. There are four main possibilities, given in ascending order of politeness. The first is a "bald, on-record" approach: "I'm going to shut the window." The second is positive politeness, or a show of respect: "I'm going to shut the window, is that OK?" The third is negative politeness, which presumes that the request will be an intrusion or an inconvenience: "I'm sorry to disturb you, but I want to shut the window." The fourth is an indirect strategy which does not insist on a course of action at all: "Gosh, it's cold in here."

The first three of those options are plain instrumental speech, and are the sort of approaches that the conversation manuals warn you against. The fourth one alone leads into the realm of conversation as such. Here the purpose of speaking is not so much to get a point across, more to find out what others think about it. This principle of co-operation is one of the things that set conversation apart from other superficially similar activities such as lectures, debates, arguments and meetings. Other qualities which help to define conversation include the equal distribution of speaker rights; mutual respect among speakers; spontaneity and informality; and a non-businesslike ambience. The last of these was well caught by [Samuel] Johnson when he defined conversation as "talk beyond that which is necessary to the purposes of actual business".

From *The Economist*

Dec.19th,2006

ELE 16

Document C



William Hogarth, Marriage à la mode,
(1743-1745)
Plate IV: Le Toilette.

Sean Shesgreen, Engravings by Hogarth, New-York, Dover (1993)

Marriage à la mode, (Plate IV)

Downloaded from the University of Pennsylvania on April 10, 2015

Copyrighted Material