

## ELE23, SESSION 2008 (*The Economist*, Wilde, Hogarth)

### *Suggested plan (X. Lachazette)*

**Intro:** (a) Thread running through the 3 docs: the Art & Artifice of conversation = recipes for good or evil behavior

#### **1) *The enduring art of Conversation***

- a) Cicero, even the Greeks before him → a set of rules (enumerate the main ones)
- b) Those rules are mostly respected in the Hogarth painting. Some are hilariously breached in the Wilde excerpt. For the main rules, see lines: 6-8, 11-2, 17-9, 41-3. The 3 examples of *disrespected* rules in Wilde are: “deal seriously with serious matters” + “never criticize people behind their backs” + “do not talk about yourself” (l. 8-9) → formality or not (“a non-business ambience,” article, line 42), humor or not, depending on whether or not you abide by this simple set of rules, or on whether *you make a point* of not abiding by them, in order to amuse or shock, as the case might be.
- c) Hence, various degrees of politeness to get along in society / Society (when you hobnob with the great, rich or famous). Which may lead one (esp. the ambitious or parvenu type) to using conversation strategically.

#### **2) *An art which fosters variety***

- a) Cf. one of the rules: never speak too much of yourself, or of the same subject too long → the perfect talker / conversationalist has to be versatile.
- b) This is extremely visible in the Wilde excerpt: Enumerate the main subjects broached by these few characters in such a short space of time: sex(ual allusions), insincerity, sons v. mothers-in-law, being select, rakes, double standards (= serious defense of women in a man’s world), married life, appearances, sounding clever in society, reformed rakes, shallow society, indifference, gowns, etc. → not only versatile, but volatile!
- c) It would therefore be interesting to oppose vivacity / boredom in the Hogarth engraving: those who converse are lively, while the castrato’s audience seem bored (apart from the lady in white who looks in raptures) → a kind of split in the engraving. Oppose this to the frequent movements – 1st the Duchess of Berwick, then Lord Darlington (lines 1, 3, 11-2, 19, 32, 51, 55, 57-8, 65-6, 70).

#### **3) *The artifice of conversation; or, how to use deceptive recipes***

- a) Small talk can hide much: lovers, cuckolded or womanizing husbands, gendered injustices, scandal mongering, & the spreading of rumors. Cf. the concept of “instrumental speech” in the excerpt from *The Economist*, though used in a different sense – explain the sense in the article: speech that makes others act or allow you to *act*, as opposed to speech that allows you & your listener(s) to launch into *a (real) conversation*.
- b) Here instrumental = making use of others in order to reach a certain goal → hence associated with the ideas of insincerity, scheming. Say a few words about *Marriage A-la-Mode*, and explain that lawyer Silvertongue & the future Duchess will become lovers, that the Duke will die in a duel, that their child will suffer from some form of pox, etc.
- c) In other words, depending on its use, the most natural of arts can help one achieve the most scandalous aims. In itself, the phrase “politeness strategies” (article, lines 29-30) is extremely ambiguous.

**Concl:** the noble art of conversation can be turned on its head, and made debatable use of. Or one might argue that this has always been the case: What has changed is that hypocrisy & decorum reign supreme in the 18th-c. engraving, whereas Wilde blatantly & uncompromisingly exposes such (apparently) common practices through humor & irony.