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Book Review

Larson, Katherine R. *Early Modern Women in Conversation*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 218 pp. $90.00.

In *Early Modern Women in Conversation* Katherine Larson explains that conversation offered early modern women both a challenge and an opportunity. On the one hand, conversation's multiple connotations—it could signify sexual as well as verbal exchange—posed a threat to a woman's virtuous reputation. But on the other, textual conversation—the imitation of conversational rules in a range of different written genres—provided ways for women writers to assert agency and gain authority. If women were excluded from humanist and other conversational spaces, textual conversation defines a metaphorical space in which women might exercise greater control over conversational boundaries and, as a result, find greater freedom to participate in a range of different discourses. The greatest contribution of Larson's study, therefore, is the theoretical and historical examination of the category of textual conversation. As Larson points out, we are living in an age dominated by textual conversation: Facebook, Twitter, and other forms of social media thrive on the mixture

of oral and textual conventions of communication. Larson shows how the liminality of textual conversation—suspended between public and private—was productive for many early modern women writers. Understood as a collection of genres—the letter, the prefatory address—and strategies—metaphors of the closet or heart, rhetorical figures of voice—textual conversation is particularly useful for understanding the historical circumstances of women's writing in the early modern period. Covering several major writers of the seventeenth century, including Mary Sidney Herbert, Amelia Lanyer, Mary Wroth, and Margaret Cavendish, Larson's book will be of interest not only to scholars of those writers, but also to those interested in seventeenth-century literature, the prehistory of the feminization of conversation in the eighteenth century, and women's literary history.

Early Modern Women in Conversation includes an introduction, six chapters, and a brief conclusion. The first part, "Gendering Conversation and Space in Early Modern England," includes two chapters that historicize conversational practices and genres of the early modern period. Chapter One, "'Intercourses of Friendship': Gender, Conversation, and Social Performance," explores the "rules" for conversation defined in Continental and English conduct books. Drawing upon the insights of Norbert Elias, Larson shows the importance of self-control for successful participation in civil conversation. Conversation, defined as an "individual's interaction with a select community" (23), required an "internalized and seemingly effortless" (29) ability to speak and behave appropriately to the situation. Conversation posed more challenges to women, however, because the carefully cultivated "openness" that was a hallmark of civil conversation was understood to be incompatible with the gendered

requirement for chastity. Conversational self-control, therefore, which for men was displayed through "verbal and behavioral dexterity," could be defined for women as silence, an apparent refusal of conversation (32). This paradox explains why textual conversation is so important for women. Epistolarity—the most common form of textual conversation—gives women more control over the context and boundaries of an interaction. Letters allow a woman to "defend the sanctity of her body by distancing herself from the physicality of oral intercourse," while still engaging with the conventions of conversation through writing (36). Larson uses this insight to motivate the analyses of literary texts that follow. The rhetorical strategies of textual conversation were valuable to early modern women writers because they enabled women to control their exposure to dangers of publicity while still participating in literary culture. Textual conversation allows women to "transform gendered constructions of women's 'place' and language in the period through situated utterance" (43). Larson illustrates this "feminist pragmatics" in her second chapter, "Gendering Conversation and Space in Early Modern England," which shows how the closet, a symbol of the containment of women's bodies and words, was used by women writers, particularly Amelia Lanyer in *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, as a metaphor that enables wide-ranging social and theological engagement. For Lanyer the closet offers a metaphorical space for social connection, self-reflection, and imitation of Christ (51).

Part Two, "The Sidneys in Conversation," describes the use of textual conversation among two generations of Sidney women. Chapter Three, "Speaking to God with a 'cloven tongue': The Sidney-Pembroke Psalter," argues that Mary Sidney Herbert's contributions to the Psalms translations begun by her brother Sir Philip

Sidney are distinguished by their increased emphasis on the conversational elements of the poems. For Sidney Herbert, textual conversation, including exchanges with herself, God, and her brother, enables her to "praise and teach publicly, and to extend that ability to a godly community that incudes and valorizes women's voices" (88). Chapter Four, which describes the influence of Shakespeare's *Loves Labour's Lost* on Mary Wroth's *Love's Victory*, argues that conversational games provide the structural framework for Wroth's play and that these games offer women a "ludic agency" that authorizes their passions and rhetorical practices (100). Together these chapters illustrate the valuable flexibility of textual conversation as an analytical frame for early modern women's writing. Larson's focus on the rhetorical strategies of textual conversation shows how women who are working in radically different genres and modes—in this case psalm translations and pastoral drama—may nevertheless exercise shared modes of literary engagement.

The final section of the book, "The Cavendishes in Conversation," likewise includes two chapters about the literary activities of women in a single aristocratic family. Chapter Five examines poetry and drama by Jane Cavendish and Elizabeth Brackley. Writing during wartime, the sisters drew upon the conventions of *honnêteté* and *salon* culture to assert the possibility of female alliance through conversation. Chapter Six focuses on the conversational strategies of Margaret Cavendish's paratexts, a space, analogous to the closet, where women writers gain agency through the control of textual boundaries. In these final chapters, which describe women's responses to social and political upheaval, Larson extends her model of textual conversation by considering the potential value of an aggressive or manipulative

conversational style. The characters of Cavendish and Brackley's play, *The Concealed Fancies*, achieve their ends through strategic departures from decorum. Likewise Margaret Cavendish's paratexts combine aggression and deference in a way that seems to flout conventions of civility.

Larson concludes her book with a quotation from the humanist Stefano Guazzo, who wrote that, "A man can not be a right man without Conversation" (170). Larson shows that women also needed conversation; however, for women it was textual conversation, with the greater flexibility and control that it provided, that offered a more "powerful tool for linguistic and social engagement." (167). *Early Modern Women in Conversation* offers a valuable service by providing a survey of several women writers' use of conversational strategies, but Larson's most significant contribution is the theorization of the category of textual conversation. This analytical concept has potential for application in contexts that exceed the scope of the book. As Larson acknowledges, the women studied in this book are largely, with the exception of Lanyer, aristocratic women who were members of established literary families. I found Larson's analysis of aggressive and even failed conversational strategies one of the most provocative and potentially productive ideas of the book. As Judith Butler argues, reworking Bourdieu, "the disruptive potential of performative language often derives from the decision to *depart* from conventional contexts of utterance" (qtd. 130). Larson's work encourages future investigations of additional examples of textual conversation, particularly by non-elite women and men, as a way to see how deference to and departure from conversational norms offered a wide range of writers a route to literary invention.

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