

Katherine R. Larson. *Early Modern Women in Conversation*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. Pp xii, 218.

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Rather than focusing solely on obvious forms of textual conversation, such as dialogue and epistolary exchange, Katherine Larson works from a productively rich and yet historically grounded definition of ‘conversation’ to explore how women appropriated various cultural codes of conversation in their writings — whether psalm translations, prefatory addresses, household drama, or unanswered letters — in ways that emphasized their selected genres’ interactive qualities. This choice to move beyond formal literary dialogue stems from a recognition that women writers in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England did not commonly choose to write in this genre, perhaps ‘because of its affiliation with humanism and its concomitant emphasis on public responsibility’ (4). Larson’s work thus fits within the feminist critical tradition of expanding definitions or shifting terms in order to reassess women’s engagement in discourses from which they were previously thought to have been (and often ‘officially’ were) excluded. Just as revising our understanding of what constitutes ‘political’ action has yielded a clearer sense of women’s political involvement in the period, Larson’s emphasis on ‘conversation’ over dialogue allows her to draw attention to how women tapped into and adapted, in their own writings, codes of civil interaction that circulated in humanist, male-authored dialogues and conduct books aimed primarily at male readers who were expected to become publicly engaged. Departing from past criticism that tends to separate the conventions of textual dialogue from actual verbal conversation, Larson insists on conversation — even in textual forms — as an embodied, situated speech act: an insistence that demands, of course, an exploration of what it meant to converse as a woman.

By attending to the interactive qualities of women’s writings across a range of genres and situations, Larson’s study reveals that women made use of conversational strategies within protected spaces they created in their texts in order to converse with society beyond those texts on socio-political issues — even and especially when their gender, class, or social situation restricted access to modes of conversation outside these textual spaces. Most of the literary works *Women in Conversation* analyzes come from aristocratic writers who in different ways experienced a degree of loss in their social status

or personal relationships: Mary Sidney (the Sidney-Pembroke psalter), Mary Wroth (*Love's Victory*), Jane Cavendish and Elizabeth Brackley (*The Concealed Fancies*), and Margaret Cavendish (paratextual material). The study takes an interdisciplinary approach to these texts. The carefully historicized readings consider early modern discourses that shaped conversational practice, such as humanist dialogues and courtesy literature, as well as architectural developments that determined the physical spaces of conversation. Larson's analyses also draw on more recent insights from linguistics, feminist criticism, and cultural studies to theorize and thus make visible women's textual experimentation with conversational conventions and tactics to construct 'authoritative speaking positions for themselves and their female protagonists' (4).

The attention Larson gives to the authorizing strategies of women writers, along with the study's interrogation of the interrelationship between space, gender, and the body, treads familiar ground within feminist literary criticism. The examination of how space, gender, and the body intersect with the topic of 'conversation', however, shows that the interpretive possibilities that emerge from an awareness of this dynamic interrelationship are far from exhausted. Part one on 'Gendering Conversation and Space' opens with a chapter that situates early modern precepts of conversation within the period's discourse of civility, drawing out the paradox of conversational decorum as a means of preserving social hierarchy and yet as an effective tool for negotiating one's standing within that hierarchy. The conflation of verbal and physical interaction that the chapter traces, however, posed different challenges for women than for men, with women more likely to face interpretations of their verbal self-control (or lack thereof) as a signifier of their sexual containment or promiscuity. The chapter nonetheless proposes that viewing the rules of decorous conversation as 'tools' available for strategic use instead of as 'injunctions' 'shifts the site of women's conversations from one of restriction to one of negotiated action' (34). While textual forms of conversation did not efface conversation's physical associations, writing did permit a greater measure of control over the 'context' of 'interaction' as well as over the 'boundaries of the body' (36). Chapter two examines the closet, the first of several textual spaces linked to the body that women writers employed as part of their authorizing strategies. Following an examination of the architectural closet's cultural roles, including its location on the threshold between private and public as well as its associations with inner physiological and mental chambers, Larson highlights Aemelia Lanyer's creation of closet

spaces in the dedicatory epistles to *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* and her set-up of her text as itself a closet space that her readers may enter to interact with Christ. These textual spaces allow Lanyer to interact imaginatively with her socially elevated dedicatees while providing her with a measure of control over access to her text. The chapter itself places Lanyer in conversation with the more socially privileged writers on whom the remaining chapters concentrate, revealing that women writers' similar strategic uses of textual conversational space extend across class differences.

The following chapters likewise provide fresh and convincing readings of the selected writings by Sidney, Wroth, Brackley and Jane Cavendish, and Margaret Cavendish, each highlighting a different textual space of conversation that links with the body. Part two on 'The Sidneys in Conversation' opens with a chapter that continues to explore the closet space, this time in Mary Sidney's psalm translations, which Larson discusses as employing inward conversation with God to inspire and enable outward expression and action — including 'poetic agency and political intervention' (66). The next chapter in this section takes a different angle into the strategically flexible use of voice — often ambiguous in the psalm translations where psalmist, translator, and reader overlap in the speaker's 'I' — by turning to the playful space of conversational game in Mary Wroth's *Love's Victory*. Larson presents a strong case for Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost* as a precursor to Wroth's play, and contends that in both works the roles of leadership and authority that women can enact within conversational games do not dissipate along with the ephemeral realm of play. Instead, the games create space for 'politically significant examples of language use' and 'self fashioning' that resonate in the 'broader realms the characters inhabit', so that the boundary between game and reality becomes difficult to discern (91).

Part three of Larson's study brings us from the Sidneys to another socially privileged family for whom the practice of decorous conversation was central: the Cavendishes. Chapter five begins this section with a discussion of how Jane Cavendish and Elizabeth Brackley turned their civil war imprisonment into a kind of salon conversational space in which, collaboratively and drawing on the ideals of *honnêteté* associated with Henrietta Maria's court and Royalist culture, they manipulated conversational codes to align aggressive and assertive verbal skill with virtue and with political and physical self-defence. Chapter six completes this section by considering Margaret Cavendish's determination to control the threshold space of her extensive paratext, in which she too employs conversation aggressively, even abrasively, and yet

paradoxically as a force meant to civilize her readers. Just as placing Wroth's *Love's Victory* in conversation with Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost* productively adjusts our understanding of both texts, by comparing Cavendish to Ben Jonson Larson here makes a claim for Cavendish's overlooked importance for scholarship on 'prefatory rhetoric' in the period (141). Identifying Jonson as a major influence also redefines Cavendish's authorial self-representation as drawing on a learned and self-conscious model of addressing readers, instead of taking 'Shakespeare's "natural" genius as a more sympathetic model' for this female author who was 'comparatively uneducated' (142). Larson explores how Cavendish reframes contemporary discourses of civility and gender while using her paratext to compensate for a loss of social stability, so that, as with the previous chapters, this final one demonstrates a female author's creation of a textual conversational space to engage with political and social concerns beyond the text.

Beyond the scope of the particular texts *Women in Conversation* examines, the insights Larson offers into women's emphasis on the interactive qualities of their selected genres — and into their creation of textual spaces that adapt contemporary codes of conversational decorum to secure writerly agency, authority, and a means to engage politically in their societies — certainly hold relevance for considerations of other texts and social situations. In particular, this study lays the groundwork, I think, for comparative investigations into how less socially privileged women make textual use of conversational strategies. What different codes of conversation, for instance, might Isabella Whitney's paratext or her ironic communication of her final will and testament to London tap into, and to what purposes? Even apart from the book's relevance for different early modern texts and contexts, Larson's readers, as they learn about the tactics of these early modern women, will likely find themselves reflecting on their own awareness of current conversational codes and their experiences with a different set of textual conversational spaces, such as email, online forums, or social networking. *Women in Conversation's* application of recent linguistic and cultural studies to early modern texts facilitates such comparison. One useful concept upon which Larson builds is Pierre Bourdieu's idea that 'linguistic strategies' are always a 'product of their field' (42). Larson's contention that this relationship works both ways, that 'if space can shape a speaker's language and behaviour, so too can a speaker shape and create a space', becomes a cornerstone of her argument about early modern women's textual conversations and yet resonates with our own cultural moment. The potential similarities between the uses 'now' and 'then' of textual conversation

for social agency are not a main concern of the book, but Larson does render the connections explicit in her introduction and conclusion. Specifically, she wonders about textual conversation's 'potential for solipsism and isolation', likening a blogger addressing 'an unseen and anonymous internet audience' to Mary Sidney Herbert's psalmist talking 'to God or herself' (166). For Larson, though, 'even in its seemingly most solitary manifestations' conversation is 'concerned with mediating relationships between self and other' (167). Academic research concerned with early literature itself constitutes perhaps one of the most 'solitary manifestations' of conversation. Opposing the critical tendency to foreground the differences between early modern culture and our own, Ian McAdam recently asked, 'must we not rest until we have rendered the early modern historical moment completely alien to us' and 'are not our *identifications* with early modern culture the intellectual gestures that make our professional activity the most compelling, especially as we share the results of our research in the classroom?'¹ Larson's conclusion signals agreement with this position, and in my opinion too placing early modern culture in conversation with our own is a final strength of this book, even if one that is relegated to a relatively minor framing device for the study.

Notes

- 1 Ian McAdam, Rev. of Kristen Poole, *Supernatural Environments in Shakespeare's England: Spaces of Demonism, Divinity, and Drama*, *Early Theatre* 15.1 (2012), 241.

Christopher Marsh. *Music and Society in Early Modern England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp 609 + 1 audio CD.

KATHERINE HUNT *Early Theatre* 16.1 (2013), 193–6
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In this important new book Christopher Marsh uncovers the variety of music made and heard in early modern England, the 'sheer vibrancy of its musical culture' (1). Historical surveys of the period have overlooked music, and even musicological studies often ignore the music that English people heard most