

A girls’ night out? Well, for those women reading this, we’ve all done it. For me, it means Christine, Gill, Kate, Liz, Louisa, Lucy, Morag: a time when we come together, without husbands, partners or men, in order to support one another, confess personal anguishes, and relate our opinions on wider social changes. Yes, we’ve discussed women in the U.S. military, women archbishops, and widespread genital mutilation as well as romance, marriage, childbirth, and the death of elderly parents. Not one of us has consulted a conduct book, a guide to female rhetoric, or the practices to which women in earlier centuries responded to. Yet, there is continuity: a commonality that posits a tradition of women’s conversation that evades a lack of authorial knowledge and says much in support of a material tradition of experience. Both books reviewed here comment upon the development of a female tradition of conversation, both oral and textual.

Katherine Larson focuses specifically upon the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, beginning with an understanding of how early modern social climbers needed “conduct manuals” in order to help them succeed in a culture in which “status was no longer guaranteed by birth” (2). She explores the particular ramifications these social parameters had for women, noting the dangers of social interaction and the ways in which five women negotiated the boundaries between public and private intercourse: Mary Sidney Herbert, Mary Wroth, the two sisters Elizabeth Brackley and Jane Cavendish, and their step-mother Margaret Cavendish. Larson is acutely aware of the ramifications of space and time as well as the impact of humanism and early modern theories of dialogue, so that while her analyses provide illuminating insights into the works of the writers considered, they also contribute to a wider understanding of the early modern discourse of conversation.
Her book is divided into three parts. The first explores the ways in which language was associated with the gendered body and how women’s conversation was confined by patriarchal convention within the private sphere. Nevertheless, Larson demonstrates that early modern women used “textual conversation . . . [as an] alternative to oral interaction,” which allowed them to “reframe the prescriptive boundaries,” in particular, the “closet” (38 and 40). Parts 2 and 3 consider two family groups, the Sidneys and Cavendishes, respectively. Sidney’s psalm translations are analyzed as dialogue-poems that use inward discourse to comment upon public issues, while Wroth’s play, Love’s Victory, is seen to access “ludic spaces . . . [in order] to facilitate the expression of women’s political and sexual desires” (109). Larson demonstrates the importance of conversation within a politicized family setting via the Cavendishes, commenting particularly upon the sisters’ collaborative drama and their stepmother’s ability “to redefine codes of civility . . . in order to master a discursive field . . . [and] an eternal reputation” (165). Overall, Larson argues cogently that “the textual conversations of early modern women . . . [illustrate] a powerful rhetorical and creative practice that remaps women’s relationship to space and language” (170).

Jane Donawerth’s book is more wide-ranging, but it begins in chapter one by describing the ways in which early modern humanist concepts of education served to facilitate women’s writing about conversation and the art of rhetoric. Quite rightly she notes a distinction between the way these works “are centered on women’s experience with domestic communication rather than the masculine experience of public oratory” and concludes that this female “counterdiscourse of conversational rhetoric . . . [became] equally powerful to men’s public speaking” (13 and 40). In coming to this conclusion, the chapter draws upon the writings of Madeleine de Scudéry, Margaret Cavendish, Bathsua Makin, and Mary Astell. Chapter 2 looks at those eighteenth- and nineteenth-century conduct books by women with a particular focus upon the rhetorical advice given on conversation and letter-writing. Here the authors considered are Hannah More, Lydia Sigourney, Eliza Farrar, Florence Hartley, and Jennie Willing, each demonstrating how political discourses impacted upon their sense of how women ought to speak. Chapter 3 turns to defenses of women’s preaching that
argue for the equality of men and women to communicate God’s word and thereby links spiritual language to the defense of women’s rights in general. The range of texts considered in this chapter is extensive, from Margaret Fell’s Quaker contentions through the spiritual memoir of Jarena Lee, the conversion narrative of Ellen Stewart, the biblical oration of Lucretia Mot, and the educational pamphlet of Catherine Booth to Frances Willard’s personal testimony. The final chapter concludes with a discussion of elocution handbooks and with an analysis of how women proffered instruction about how to perform emotion on stage and in public life. In terms of bodily performance, Anna Morgan’s work elucidates drama, Genevieve Stubbs focuses on dance, Emily Bishop refers to physical education, and Hallie Quinn Browne deals with elocution. The conclusion to *Conversational Rhetoric* presents the women writers considered as using rhetorical performance based upon a discourse of private conversation to develop a strong claim for women’s rights to speak openly and as they wished.

Still, what make these books fascinating are the voices of the individual women that emerge. They are unafraid to speak directly to God and about God: from Sidney’s dramatic question, “Why hast thou thus / repulst and scattred us?” (Larson, 70) through Fell’s sharp reminder that “God put no such difference between the Male and the Female as men would make” (Donawerth, 79) to the marvelous Lee who, upon listening to her minister’s inadequacies, responded in extraordinary fashion: “he seemed to have lost the spirit; when in the same instant, I sprang, as by an altogether supernatural impulse, to my feet, when I was aided from above to give an exhortation on the very text which my brother Williams [the minister] had taken” (Donawerth, 83). They defend women’s speech, as Makin does with her rueful acceptance that “the tongue is the only weapon women have to defend themselves, and they had need to use it dexterously,” and condemn it, as Margaret Cavendish does in her attack on those women who “take off that blemish from their sex of knowing little, by speaking much” (Donawerth, 34 and 32). They are egalitarian—“Politeness is as necessary to a happy intercourse with the inhabitants of the kitchen, as with those of the parlour”—and snobbish—“they [servants] come here of the lowest ranks of English and Irish peasantry, with as much idea of politeness as the pig domesticated in the cabin of the latter” (Farrar and Hartley in
Donawerth, 60 and 67). They can depict tart interchanges, as when Wroth comments about two female characters, one vowing, “I love him most,” to which the other responds sourly, “I love him best” (Larson, 104), and be quite acidic in their own right, as when More attacks Scudéry’s “twisted wit” (Donawerth, 46). Moreover, they concern themselves with bodily demeanor as well as verbal dexterity, describing how “the breast heaves and swells,” how “yawning is helpful,” and how to flirt: “Door opens. Eyes turn right toward object entering. Head follows in rotary motion, leveling gaze on object. Face assumes an expression of delighted surprise. Titillation of eyelids…” (Morgan, Bishop, and Stubbs in Donawerth, 111, 117, and 115, respectively). Both Larson and Donawerth are to be congratulated and thanked for allowing these voices to be heard once more.

To a certain extent I have given more space to Donawerth, but that is because she covers more authors than Larson and, for those whose research interests tend that way, it is important to list the material considered in both texts. However, the number of women writers and the extent of their generic coverage mean that Donawerth offers tantalizing glances into what is a fascinating area of research, whereas Larson proffers a full and satisfying understanding of those fewer authors she considers. The field of a feminized conversational rhetoric is, as both authors note, under-worked, and both texts offer an important incursion into this new field of scholarship. Still, while there is scope for overviews such as Donawerth’s Conversational Rhetoric: The Rise and Fall of a Women’s Tradition, solid excavations still need to be done, and, as such, Larson’s Early Modern Women in Conversation is a more perceptive and thoughtful account that allows us to see how women used conversation to lay claim to independent subjectivity. And, as such, I should like to conclude by taking a quote from Larson that demonstrates unequivocally the power of the female voice. At the close of the Cavendish sisters’ drama, the two female protagonists discuss their experience of married life, and one recounts a conversation with her husband:

I wish, said he, she [an obedient wife] might be your example, and you have no reason to slight her, for she is of a noble family. I know that, I said, and do the more admire why she will
contract her family, nobleness and birth, to the servitude of her husband, as if he had bought her his slave, and I’m sure her father bought him for her, for he gave her a good portion, and now in sense who should obey? . . . and so with a forced kind of mirth, [he] went out of the room, and I understood he had nothing else to say. (Larson, 136–37)

The comic account of marital conversation is as pertinent to the seventeenth century as to a twenty-first century girls’ night out, yet it also lays claim to a discourse in which men have “nothing else to say” and which correspondingly asserts the power of female conversation.

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