

Early Modern Women in Conversation. Katherine R. Larson.

Early Modern Literature in History. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. xii + 218 pp. \$29.

“To converse,” Katherine Larson astutely remarks, “is in its most fundamental sense, to engage with society” (2). Larson purposefully chooses “conversation” as a category to analyze early modern women, instead of “dialogue,” to reflect conversation’s broader and more performative processes of engagement, which incorporate the “interactive features of other genres” (5). By exploring Psalm translations, paratexts, household drama, and letters, composed predominantly by female members of the Sidney and Cavendish circles, Larson demonstrates how women engaged with contemporary conversational theories, blurred the lines between oral and written exchanges, and manipulated the boundaries of conversational spaces.

It is at the intersections of boundaries where Larson’s study is most illuminating. In the first chapter, “Intercourses of Friendship: Gender, Conversation and Social

Performance,” Larson highlights the blurred boundary between language and the gendered body. Such blurring takes place at the intersection where paper, ink, and seals become the “paper bodies” of their senders, and where truly civilized conversation can only occur with simultaneously appropriate bodily behavior. For women the boundaries were vehemently policed, and speaking women were associated with sexual promiscuity. “She’s unchaste; / Her mouth will open to every stranger’s ear,” says Herod in Elizabeth Cary’s *The Tragedy of Mariam* (1613) (30). Larson demonstrates how early modern women were well aware of such prescriptions, and the letters of the Countess of Pembroke skillfully navigate contemporary conversational strategies to recast authoritative control. Larson draws attention to Pembroke’s letters to William Cecil, where she mitigates the anxiety caused by her “sexualised speaking body” (36) by characterizing her letters as “blanke” and “dead paper” (37). Pembroke’s strategic negotiations of the gendered ramifications of her own conversational interaction in turn authorize her own self-expression.

In the second chapter, Larson explores how Aemilia Lanyer’s *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* also challenges the boundary between the material and immaterial, as closets, locks, and keys pervade her poetic expositions on the Passion. The lockable closet epitomized early modern anxieties over spatial boundaries, control, and sexual access, which was exacerbated by women’s usual role as key holders of their households. Lanyer utilizes closet imagery in order to exert control over her audience’s access to her text, and consequently, to Christ. Lanyer’s dedication to Lucy, Countess of Bedford, “Me thinkes I see faire Virtue readie stand, / T’unlocke the closet of your lovely breast,” demonstrates her preoccupation “with exclusive spaces . . . controlled by virtuous women” (52). This conversational strategy allowed Lanyer to reach up the social ladder and situate herself alongside her privileged patrons.

Larson also draws fruitful comparisons between male and female writers; in chapter 4 she demonstrates how both Mary Wroth in *Love’s Victory* and Shakespeare in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* challenge the conventional ephemerality of the ludic framework. As a result, Wroth and Shakespeare extend the conversational agency afforded to their female protagonists beyond the isolated boundaries of their playing spaces. In the final chapter, “The Civil Conversations of Margaret Cavendish and Ben Jonson,” Larson argues that although Cavendish’s prefaces are modeled on Jonson’s (who represents himself as a civil and civilizing force), she takes her strategies further. Cavendish’s paratextual conversational encounters reveal an aggressive attempt to control the reception of her works, even orally: “*I Desire those that read any of this Book that every Chapter may be read clearly, without long stops and staires*” (148). Cavendish then carefully redefines civility in order to justify her own aggression as a civilizing force demonstrative of her own virtue, by recalling the “active virtue displayed by her dramatic heroines” (155). Moreover, Larson argues, such strategies were due to her status on the edges of society, as an exiled Royalist woman writer.

Textual conversation can provide a platform for voices that are denied authority in oral contexts. But “gender was not . . . the only factor affecting women’s conversational capital” (167); the authors in Larson’s study can claim at least some power due to the authority they enjoyed from their social and familial statuses. It would be a fascinating extension of this study to explore how such strategies were utilized by those lower down the social hierarchy, or by enclosed religious women. Larson’s volume is an important contribution to the existing literature on women’s writing, and deserves to be read widely by scholars interested in the early modern period more generally.

Emilie K. M. Murphy, *National University of Ireland Galway*