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Conversation

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Keywords

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Abstract

Conversation was a polysemic practice of sociability in leisured and learned classes. Ideally, it cultivated politeness, pleasure, ease and reciprocity. At the same time, its plural meanings also accommodated tensions within the conversable world, encompassing controversy and collision of mind as well as harmony. Defined as a means of individual improvement and self-fashioning, conversation also aimed to develop not just knowledge but the mind and critical faculties. Conversations that were part of the fabric of social and familial exchanges were the inspiration for instructional dialogic texts called ‘Familiar Format’ and conversation became a pedagogy.

‘Conversation’, as developed in seventeenth-century France, was considered the consummate expression of the social, linguistic and aesthetic ideals of *politesse*. Conceived primarily as a social exchange, a delightful commerce in which all agréments and bienséances converged, conversation and how to conduct it was discussed in many treatises and manuals but it was Antoine Gombaud, Chevalier de Méré, who first theorised its principles in his essay ‘De La Conversation’.

La Conversation veut estre pure, libre, honneste, et le plus souvent enjoiée [...] il faut que les mouvements de l’ame soient moderez dans la Conversation [...] ce qui me semble le plus necessaire, mais le plus difficile , c’est [...] de bien penser sur le sujet qui se presente [...] et de sçavoir exprimer chaque chose à part du meilleur ton , et de l’air le plus agréable.¹

These key principles were followed in eighteenth-century England while conversation in France remained a model for the English to emulate. ‘It will be hard to find anywhere more agreeable conversation than among the French’.²

As conversation was not just talk and ‘could function as a metonym for all kinds of social interaction’, it could be defined in a variety of ways.³ Ideally, conversation was polite and pleasing, ‘assumed the equality of participants and insisted on ... reciprocity’. Although it was construed as a ‘zone of freedom, ease and naturalness’, its plural meanings accommodated tensions within the conversable world, so that conversation could encompass controversy and collision of mind as well as harmony.⁴

Integral to sociability and politeness and a means of individual improvement and self-fashioning, conversation had to be instructive as well as entertaining. Contemporaries had much to say about the role conversation played in developing not just knowledge but the mind and critical judgement. As late eighteenth-century woman of letters Hester Chapone observed, ‘it is almost impossible that an evening should pass in mutual endeavours to entertain each other [in conversation], without something being struck out, that would, in some degree enlighten and improve the mind’.⁵ This mix of entertainment and ‘improvement’, hailed by David Hume as the felicitous joining of the ‘Learned’ with the ‘Conversable World’, made it possible to find ‘Topics of Conversation fit for the Entertainment of rational Creatures’.⁶ Being able to converse well on a wide range of subjects including natural history, chemistry, mineralogy and botany ensured that a guest would be ‘particularly esteemed’. (Gleadle 64)

Conversation had early been associated with women, not just because it embodied their ‘natural aversion to coarseness’, and their refined and delicate manners, but because, thought to be ‘naturally’ polite, elegant and delicate, their conversation would discipline and polish

male tongues.⁷ ‘If there were no other Use in the Conversation of Ladies’, argued Jonathan Swift, ‘it is sufficient that it would lay a Restraint upon those odious Topicks of Immodesty and Indecencies, into which the Rudeness of our Northern Genius, is so apt to fall’.⁸ ‘It is to the Fair Sex that we owe the most shining qualities of which our’s (sic) is master [...] Conversation with the Ladies is the Shorter, Pleasanter and more Effectual method of arriving at the summit of genteel behaviour’.⁹ Even though women’s conversation appears to have been promoted primarily to improve men’s, it created a significant space for women’s voice in the mixed social spaces of eighteenth-century sociability, and was an important spur to their education. Yet, while [Addison](#) claimed that mixed conversation was the ideal social state, it was thought by some to be dangerous because men ‘fall into the Effeminacy and Delicacy of Women’ and women ‘take up the Confidence and Boldness of Men’ in their manners and their language.¹⁰ As poet Joseph Spence explained, while ‘some conversation with the ladies is necessary to smooth and sweeten the temper as well as the manners of men...too much of it is apt to effeminate or debilitate both.’¹¹ Conversation as a practice was not for all that condemned. Godwin, who claimed he ‘always had a passion for colloquial discussion’, reflected that ‘Conversation accustoms us to hear a variety of sentiments, obliges us to exercise patience and attention, and gives freedom and elasticity to our disquisitions’, while Samuel Johnson explained that

Even the acquisition of knowledge is often much facilitated by the advantages of society: he that never compares his notions with those of others, readily acquiesces in his first thoughts, and very seldom discovers the objections which may be raised against his opinions; he, therefore, often thinks himself in possession of truth, when he is only fondling an error long since exploded.¹²

Not surprisingly, conversation would be called ‘la grande école de l’esprit’.¹³

By the middle of the eighteenth century, conversation occupied an important place in English culture but its association with polite French conversation was increasingly contentious. At issue was the desire to produce an *English* conversation, echoing the ongoing desire to fashion an *English* politeness. Polite conversation could now be regarded as a ‘specious kind of Lies’, an ‘enslavement to foreign manners’, alien to the British character, while English conversation was characterised by plain speaking and sincerity. Such critiques occasioned debates about language, masculinity and identity and fuelled the cultural rivalry between the two nations.¹⁴

By the closing years of the century, when politeness was declining as a dominant cultural form, attitudes to conversation changed as well. Taciturnity, mocked by [Addison](#) early in the century, displaced the conversational fluency that had been the hallmark of the polite gentleman and was now a signifier of the English gentleman’s masculinity and mental strength, indicating a profound shift in the definition of the gentleman and the national character. As women’s conversation was no longer useful to the construction of the

gentleman, women were advised to be silent in company, citing their ‘boundless intemperance of tongue’.¹⁵ Instead, an ‘illuminated countenance’ would show that a woman understands what a man is saying almost as ‘unequivocally as language would do’.¹⁶ Women’s conversation and opinions now had to be ‘domestic, not public’.¹⁷ However, their conversational skills could be deployed in educating children.

Education had always been one of the most important functions of conversation. As Maria Edgeworth, who theorised the use of conversation in instruction, explained, ‘from conversation, if properly managed, children may learn with ease, expedition, and delight, a variety of knowledge.’¹⁸ A character in her *Letters for Literary Ladies* declares ‘I would have my daughter read and compare various books, and correct her judgment of books by listening to the conversation of persons of sense and experience’.¹⁹ This is precisely what Lord Sheffield had enacted when he encouraged his daughter Maria Josepha, while yet a child, to converse with ‘the leading men’ he entertained at his home. While intending ‘her keen intellect’ to be stimulated and her critical judgement to be developed, he also ensured that she would learn how to express her opinions.²⁰ Exercising children’s minds *by* conversation was indivisible from training and disciplining their tongue *for* conversation. The complex skills of conversation are neither ‘natural’ nor simple. In the eighteenth century, children acquired them, along with the ‘lessons of sociability’, in good company, mainly adult.²¹ Conversation thus inextricably linked education and sociability. Learning a subject in order to converse about it did not demean the learning’s purpose, on the contrary, it was a useful, even indispensable preparation for it. When educational author Jane Marcet’s governess Mrs B urges her reluctant pupil Caroline to study political economy, she explains that ‘most subjects of general conversation [...] among liberal minded people’ are connected with it, and that were she *not* to learn it, she ‘might almost as well condemn [herself] to perpetual silence’.²²

In the late eighteenth century, conversation became a method for the construction of dialogic texts designed to instruct children of both sexes about a variety of subjects, especially science. Referred to as the Familiar Format, these texts, written mainly by women, were often modelled on the quotidian exchanges of the household, and involved one or both parents examining and discussing various topics with their children. One of the most significant features of these texts was the space and role given to the voice of fictional children, and were meant to inspire child readers who would ‘identify with the imaginary character’. Encouraged to interrupt and ask questions, they ‘speedily acquire the habit of stating their difficulties’.²³ They could thus become ‘critical observers of and, where necessary, vocal resisters to authority’.²⁴ In the following excerpt from the conversation ‘On Oxygen and Nitrogen’ in Jane Marcet’s seminal *Conversations on Chemistry*, Mrs B. the governess, is corrected by one of her pupils.

Mrs B. ... the iron, in burning, has acquired exactly the weight of the oxygen which has disappeared, and is now combined with it. It has become oxide of iron.

Caroline: I do not know what you mean by saying that the oxygen has disappeared, Mrs B., for it was always invisible.

Mrs B. True, my dear, the expression was incorrect.²⁵

As conversation became feminized and privatised, the conversational method of the familiar format constituted the most progressive and successful pedagogy of the late eighteenth early nineteenth century.²⁶

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