In the early modern period, conversation meant more than just talking; it referred to one’s manner of conducting oneself and living among others. It was central to a system of civil manners aiming at universal and intelligible sociability. Educated people in Renaissance Europe saw the need to regulate conversation due to challenges to the traditional order and hierarchy. Social mobility and claims to equality led to disputes and status anxiety, prompting a new science of manners.

Civil conversation was not about ceremonies or etiquette, but about an honest, commendable way of living. Its purpose was to please others, gain their trust, and regulate one’s behavior, emphasizing polite listening and avoiding ego dominance. In late sixteenth-century England and France, civil conversation provided an antidote to the vicious public polemics spread from the pulpit and the printing press. The private sphere allowed for freer, more fruitful dialogue compared to the contentious public discourse.

Conversation was valued as a form of social intercourse and mental exercise, offering more learning potential than formal lectures or public debates. It allowed for serendipitous and productive dialogue. Notably, it provided a space for women, who were otherwise excluded from the public sphere, to participate equally with men. By the seventeenth century, women were seen as a civilizing influence, and salons became venues for their significant role in cultural and intellectual life, fostering early feminist literature and changing attitudes about women.

The spread of French politesse in the eighteenth century, appealing to women for its valorization of them and expectations of male behavior, promoted a freer code of conduct between the sexes, countering the toxic masculinity of the Renaissance cult of honor. Thus, conversation in the early modern period was a sophisticated practice shaping civil society, intellectual engagement, and social and gender dynamics.