

Anne M. Myers. *Literature and Architecture in Early Modern England*.

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All historians of building reappraise the texts that inform its history, rebalancing the interpretation of varied sources from primary documents, architectural theory, and contemporary literature. In the present book, Anne M. Meyers perceives the architecture of early modern England to have been configured, indeed constricted, by the discourse of architectural history, determined by the supposedly inevitable conquest of a dominant classical style. She offers an alternative in a series of texts that offer stories of buildings that are subject to the vagaries of people, places, and time, and suggests that these offer something different: buildings as repositories of family or local history and legends, retaining aspects of their past through changing political and religious times. The texts she offers are familiar to everyone who has worked on this period and they range from topographical description (Camden, Stow), theoretical works (Wotton, Evelyn's translation of Fréart), drama (Jonson), to poems and diaries (Herbert and Anne Clifford). She acknowledges the circumstances and the peculiarities of each text, including the personal stories of the authors that reveal their prejudices and resentments, such as Stow's against Thomas Cromwell for stealing part of his father's garden, and their career decisions, like Wotton writing his text at speed to secure the post of provost of Eton. This sense of recognizing the moment of action parallels many other recent analyses of the visual and literary arts of this period, challenging the inevitability of the patterns we see only with hindsight.

The assertion that the classical story is still dominant has to be challenged, however. Few scholars these days would deny that we often seek to place order on

the past that was not perceived as happening at the time. The classical style is itself an attempt to order the world of building by its system of due proportion and decorum, yet everywhere we examine it, from ancient times to the eighteenth century, it appears fragmented, subjectively treated, and subject to national interpretation and customization. One valuable strand of architectural history that certainly took the classical revolution as an inevitable force emerged after the Second World War and determined the history of buildings in terms of what the treatise said they should demonstrate in two dimensions, plan and elevation, and rendered their history as a convincing pattern of rather abstracted development. Country houses rather dominated this story because of their large survival rate and their carrying of the intellectual message of architecture for about 300 years, when great public building and church building projects were few. However, modern architectural history is often very different, giving a critique through documents on the building process and its patrons, and often too through the archaeology of the standing structure. As for the long story of the dominance of classicism in England, this was expertly outlined by Giles Worsley in *Classical Architecture in Britain: The Heroic Age* and the legitimacy of that inevitability pulled apart by Jules Lubbock in *The Tyranny of Taste: The Politics of Architecture and Design in Britain 1550–1960*, both published in 1995; neither text is cited here.

In her aim to stress the narrative potential of both building fabric and the texts about architecture, other key factors are sometimes missed. John Shute's *First and Chiefe Groundes of Architecture* is but a fragment of what he intended given the political upheavals through which this shadowy figure lived, and across all these texts the tropes of architectural literary convention are sometimes underplayed. Though individual county histories are referred to in these pages, it is a pity that an early example of that genre is not included as a distinctive type of text, for their writers were the greatest storytellers of all. There is also an assumption that buildings always wear their history on their sleeves, as it were, but they frequently did not. The idea of buildings as palimpsest of the times they have lived through may sometimes have been evident but often they were not. Ruined monasteries certainly abounded in some parts of the country, but wherever they were adapted after the Reformation they were, like Henry VIII's ever-modified royal palaces, covered with paint, plaster, and stucco to conceal their past. Better editing should have corrected those points where a primary source becomes the spelling or nomenclature of place when all subsequent secondary sources and modern parlance calls them otherwise: Deorhurst, Corf, The Vine, Einsham, Monks Weremouth, Whorwell, York Cathedral, Hertland, and Umfranville out of quotation marks all look very odd. Myers's book is a thorough and multifaceted examination of all the texts under consideration but it remains a series of studies of very different literary outputs.

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