



Excess and the Mean in Early Modern English Literature (Literature in History)

Joshua Scodel

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This book examines how English writers from the Elizabethan period to the Restoration transformed and contested the ancient ideal of the virtuous mean. As early modern authors learned at grammar school and university, Aristotle and other classical thinkers praised "golden means" balanced between extremes: courage, for example, as opposed to cowardice or recklessness. By uncovering the enormous variety of English responses to this ethical doctrine, Joshua Scodel revises our understanding of the vital interaction between classical thought and early modern literary culture.

Scodel argues that English authors used the ancient schema of means and extremes in innovative and contentious ways hitherto ignored by scholars. Through close readings of diverse writers and genres, he shows that conflicting representations of means and extremes figured prominently in the emergence of a self-consciously modern English culture. Donne, for example, reshaped the classical mean to promote individual freedom, while Bacon held extremism necessary for human empowerment. Imagining a modern rival to ancient Rome, georgics from Spenser to Cowley exhorted England to embody the mean or lauded extreme paths to national greatness. Drinking poetry from Jonson to Rochester expressed opposing visions of convivial moderation and drunken excess, while erotic writing from Sidney to Dryden and Behn pitted extreme passion against the traditional mean of conjugal moderation. Challenging his predecessors in various genres, Milton celebrated golden means of restrained pleasure and self-respect. Throughout this groundbreaking study, Scodel suggests how early modern treatments of means and extremes resonate in present-day cultural debates.

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