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The banqueting house and the sweetmeat-closet in early modern England

This paper considers the sweetmeat closet and the banqueting house, common spaces in the early modern English country houses, as closely related architectural forms. The banqueting house was particularly associated with the sugar banquet in this period, to which the display of elaborate sugar sculptures was central. Written sources also associate closets with sugar-work, indicating that the foods consumed at sugar banquets were often prepared and stored in these spaces. This paper analyses several key examples of banqueting houses and closets, both those which are extant, and those which survive through depiction in drawings, plans and written sources. In doing so, it identifies the particular typologies of the two forms, and several key features which they have in common.

Most significant here is that both spaces' emphasis on privacy is a central, even defining, feature. Why was this emphasis on privacy particularly associated with spaces linked to sugar-work? One possible explanation lies in contemporary written sources including advice books, household accounts and inventories, which identify sugar-work as a particularly feminine activity. Does this suggest that the banqueting house and the sweetmeat-closet were conceived of as particularly feminine spaces?

If such gendered spaces existed, what was their function? Did they provide arenas for creativity, and the exercise of female agency? Did they somehow enhance the status of the women who practiced and displayed sugar-work within them? Or, conversely, did these secluded spaces contribute to the marginalisation of female members of the household by a patriarchal regime?