

## AN ARCHITECTURAL FRAGMENT

BY ALAN ALTIMONT

At least since James Turner's note "Upon Appleton House," published 35 years ago, convincing evidence and arguments have accrued to establish that Andrew Marvell's grand country house poem describes neither the present brick structure nor even the larger brick edifice it replaced (or of which it is the surviving central part), depicted in two engravings of 1655 or 1656, but a relatively small house of the 1540s built of stone salvaged from the site's medieval nunnery, a house shortly to undergo drastic alteration or demolition even as the poet wrote, probably in 1651-52.<sup>1</sup> Nigel Smith's introduction to the poem in his edition of *The Poems of Andrew Marvell* nicely summarizes the case.<sup>2</sup>

The first eighty lines of "Upon Appleton House: To My Lord Fairfax" develop the argument that "no foreign architect" (ll. 1-2) of grandiose structures had had a hand in this Tudor-era house, designed solely by a homegrown "humility" (ll. 41-44) that builds structures naturally suited to the inhabitants, and snug as the shell to the tortoise. The large house that would replace the house of the poem was designed and built by an English architect, James Webb, a disciple, partner, and nephew-in-law of Inigo Jones. Thus, in a very literal sense, the new house, like the old, was the result of native ingenuity, rendering Marvell's grousing about the absent influence of foreign architecture speculative, if not gratuitous. As for the foreigner who caused Marvell's trepidations but seems to have missed his chance, Smith follows John Bold's suggestion that this could have been the Huguenot David Papillon, who "may have submitted a proposal for the house."<sup>3</sup> Such a reading, though, obviates another interpretation, which, while more provocative, was certainly available to Marvell's benefactor and first intended reader, Lord Thomas Fairfax.

This is because the new house designed by Webb would in fact exhibit the aesthetics of a foreign architect—Antonio Palladio. In her 2008 article, "The Swelling Hall: Andrew Marvell and the Politics of Architecture at Nun Appleton," Jane Partner convincingly shows that Marvell has Palladio in mind as the corrupting influence, reviews the descent of early English Palladianism from Jones to Webb, and plausibly argues that the poem's theatrical scene-shifting metaphors, found mostly in the stanzas depicting the mowing of the meadows (XLVII-LX), express Marvell's political misgivings about Webb's "foreign" aesthetics, as those had found expression in the architect's contributions to various Royalist building projects and to the scenery of Stuart masques.<sup>4</sup>

Less convincing, though, and injurious to her enterprise are Partner's attempts to see in the poem evidence that Marvell had witnessed in his relatively brief stay there the virtual obliteration of the old house he praises and the near-completion of its Palladian successor. She stakes much of her case on stanza VII:

Yet thus [when Lord Fairfax enters it] the laden house does sweat,  
And scarce endures the Master great:  
But where he comes the swelling hall  
Stirs, and the square grows spherical,  
More by his magnitude distressed,

Than he is by its straitness pressed:  
And too officiously it slights  
That in itself which him delights.  
(ll. 49-56)

While well aware of the several double-entendres of these lines, Partner believes the passage a fanciful description of the actual demolition of the old house and its “engulfing” by the new. This reading, though, all but ignores stanzas V, VI, and VIII, this passage’s immediate context, which extol the house’s “humility” and “lowness” and even predict future visitors will be astonished that the larger-than-life Fairfaxes could have shoehorned themselves into such a cramped abode. If the old house had already been demolished or engulfed by the large new house when Marvell was writing, these stanzas would make no sense. More precisely, they would require the reader merely to cast aside the distinction between a humble house and a grandiose house that the poet has taken pains to develop. Whatever his misgivings about a new house, at the time he had finished his poem Marvell seems to have been in the dark about the eventual fate of the old house, possibly because the Fairfaxes may have continued to occupy it while preparations to build the new were under way.<sup>5</sup> And it may well be that the impending commencement of serious construction largely precipitated the poet’s departure.

Partner also over-optimistically invites us to scan the engravings of the new house and consider how its lantern, or cupola, “would indeed have made the ‘Square’ building appear to expand and grow ‘Spherical,’” when in point of fact it does nothing of the kind (not at least to the eye of this beholder), even taking into account Marvell’s metaphysical liberties, as when he makes a mountain out of the molehill at Bilbrough.<sup>6</sup> If some sort of actual architectural feature is alluded to in stanza VII’s image of rotundity it is much more likely to be a rotunda than a cupola. During his 1645-46 sojourn in Italy Marvell may well have seen Palladio’s Villa Capra, “La Rotunda,” in Vicenza, and he certainly saw in Rome any number of classical and neo-classical buildings (e.g. the Pantheon and St. Peter’s) whose rotundas come a good deal closer than cupolas to make a square edifice appear to grow spherical. Marvell probably left Nun Appleton in the late fall of 1652, perhaps wondering whether such a rotunda were being considered for the house-to-be. In any event, Marvell’s outlandish imagery suggests an imagined architectural feature rather than one taking shape before his very eyes.

A sturdier reading, though, is that the passage in question describes not a small house being transformed into a larger, but a house as a penetrated womb (a reading downplayed by Partner), the flat walls of the hall cartoonishly ballooning out, having been impregnated, as it were, by the master’s “ungirt and unconstrained” (l. 43) comings and goings. The double-entendres extend into stanza IX, which makes clear that a building can give birth not only to another building, but also to people: “A nunnery first gave [the Tudor house] birth / (For virgin buildings oft brought forth)” (ll. 85-86). While the Catholic nuns of yore occasionally brought forth bastards, the Protestant house of Lord and Lady Fairfax has given birth to their one and only legitimate heir, Mary, whose appearance dominates the poem’s last sixteen stanzas like an austere, deferred punch line to the naughty joking of stanza VII.

Interpreting the image as a description of coitus and pregnancy rather than of building demolition is supported by Clements R. Markham’s dated but still useful biography of Fairfax. Thomas Fairfax married Anne Vere on June 20, 1637, and brought her to his grandfather’s estate at Denton in the autumn of that year:

but the old Lord Fairfax was irritable and dictatorial; and in the following year, as

they could not live comfortably together, he gave them a separate establishment, and they went to live at his house at Nunappleton, which was ever afterwards their favourite residence.

Mary Fairfax was born on July 30, 1638 at Bishophill, another Fairfax property in nearby York, to which the couple had probably removed for the sake of Anne's comfort and safety during the last stage of her pregnancy.<sup>7</sup> This means that while Mary was most likely conceived at Denton, the young couple spent the greater part of Anne's second and third trimesters at the old Appleton House, the young wife growing more and more "big with child" within its narrow confines.<sup>8</sup> This bit of personal family history not only gives Marvell's pregnant imagery more warrant than a whole rooftop of cupolas; it also attests to a degree of intimacy between the poet and his employer—who surely must have been the source of this information—which has hitherto only been a matter of speculation.

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If, though, we dispense with Partner's strained readings and her insistence that the poet witnessed the construction almost from beginning to end, what evidence beyond conjecture is there to indicate Marvell had some inkling of the Palladian design and proportions of the house that was to come? During the summer of 2000 I had the opportunity to examine the Fairfax papers archived at the Bodleian. I began what was something of a fishing expedition primarily interested in the Lord General's poetry, but my attention soon turned to the papers attributed to his uncle Henry, minister at Bolton Percy, not far from Appleton House. Henry Fairfax lived with his nephew from 1650 until 1658 and, as Turner demonstrates, advised him on the interior design and décor of the new house.<sup>9</sup> Among Henry Fairfax's translations and compositions in French I found this brief note that has to my knowledge thus far escaped scholarly attention, including Turner's:

Io son solito non eccedere nella lun:gnezza delle Sale Due Quadri, iqua li si Facciano dalla Larghezza; ma quanto piu si approssimeranno al Quadrato, tanto piu saranno lodevoli & commode. Pallad: C.21. lib 1.

J'observe de ne donner jamais a la longueur des Sales plus que le double de leur largeur, mais plus elles approchent du quarre & plus elles serrant belles & commodes.

I do observe allways to allow for the length of a Hall no less than the double of its breadth, but the nearer they come to a square, the more beautyfull & convenient they will be.

Dubius transl: by which he makes Palladio say that he never made a handsome hall in his life. [MS Eng misc f17, (71v) 72.]

The note intrigued me since it obviously had something to do with what is at issue in the opening stanzas of Marvell's poem, and probably too with work on the house itself. Thirteen years ago, though, the complicated circumstances of the rebuilding of Appleton House were much less clear to me, and the note was so slight a fragment that I could see no immediate use for it. I filed it away and nearly forgot about it.

In the light of what has now come to be known about the evolution of the house(s), though, the gap this fragment fills has become apparent. That is, it establishes one fact:

Henry and Lord Fairfax possessed a copy of Palladio's work, *I Quattro libri dell' Architettura*, with an English translation. It was not, however, the copy annotated by Inigo Jones that Webb had inherited from his mentor. It must have been a volume owned by one of the Fairfaxes, accompanied by the work—either piecemeal or complete—of an unknown English translator.<sup>10</sup>

While undated, the note is likely to have been made during the earliest stages of planning, but not before Henry Fairfax's arrival in 1650, and, as I will suggest, not till Marvell came on the scene less than a year later. The hall that is the note's subject would be the biggest room in the house. In the Palladian scheme the front door and entry room should open immediately onto the hall, a "public" room designed to register a grand first impression on visitors and provide a suitable space for large gatherings and entertainments. As the core of the whole structure, then, the hall's dimensions and proportions had to be settled early on in the process of design and construction. At the time Marvell arrived to take up his teaching duties the Fairfaxes would still have had the sizes and proportions of rooms very much on their minds.

Before turning to how this fragment from Palladio's chapter "Of the loggia's, entries, halls, rooms, and of their form"<sup>11</sup> shores up Partner's general case for Webb being the "foreign architect," it would also be worth considering what occasioned the note and how that occasion could well have prompted the Fairfaxes to call on Marvell for a certain kind of help. There is ample evidence among their papers for the Fairfaxes' competence (more or less) with French, but considerably less so for their knowledge of Italian. This may go some way toward explaining the presence of the curious French rendering, which matches neither of the French translations of Palladio that would have been available to the Fairfaxes. Pierre Le Muet's of 1645 is very different; Roland Fréart de Chambray's 1650 version comes closer:

l'observe da faire que le longueur de mes sales n'excede iamais le double de leur largeur, mais plus elles approcheront du quarre, & plus elles seront belles & commode.<sup>12</sup>

But the version in the note mistranslates the Italian present tense verbs as future tense, indicating that the French in the note is most likely the work of Henry Fairfax himself, a step he may have taken if he were more familiar with French than Italian idioms, as was most likely the case.<sup>13</sup>

The note's oddity is easy to overlook, but it is suggestive. Henry Fairfax may have written it simply to ensure he would not forget the blunder of the translator, and perhaps to communicate the error to his nephew. The note, though, is not just a neutral communication. Because the error in the English translation occasions an error in logic (a room cannot be both longer than two squares and at the same time only slightly longer than one square), it would seem to indicate negligence on the translator's part rather than downright incompetence. Yet instead of simply noting the error, which was all that would appear to have been called for, Henry Fairfax's comment ("by which he makes Palladio say he never made a handsome hall in his life") sneeringly insinuates the translator's error has arisen not from linguistic incompetence or negligence but from poor taste, from an inability to appreciate the Palladian aesthetic Henry himself obviously admires. A final oddity is the very survival of this note, perhaps an accident of history, perhaps due to a significance now obscure to us.

Was Marvell, employed by Lord Fairfax to tutor his daughter Mary in modern languages, consulted about the error in the English translation or about the Palladio text as a whole? Even more intriguingly, was Marvell enlisted to do a little moonlighting, helping the Fairfaxes comprehend Palladio's Italian, and thus was he himself responsible for the

erroneous English translation? Was he made privy to Henry Fairfax's advice to Lord Fairfax, and did the poet and the minister clash over Palladian aesthetics? While we cannot answer these questions with certainty, it is hardly likely that the man who had shared with his daughter's tutor happy memories of his wife's pregnancy in their old house would have had reservations about consulting that same tutor—and poet who had sojourned in Italy—about an Italian text and its aesthetic claims.<sup>14</sup> And it is certainly interesting, and perhaps no coincidence, that the passage from chapter 21 of Palladio's first book is about the optimal proportions for a room, the very point of contention upon which Marvell builds the first ten stanzas of his poem.

Palladio's approach to questions of dimension and proportion and the presence of his book on architecture at Appleton House during Marvell's tenure there make him the best candidate for the poet's "foreign architect." If the poet had had even limited access to Palladio's book—and Henry Fairfax's note is circumstantial evidence that Marvell may have—the case for Webb has some footing, and need not rely on Partner's notion that the opening stanzas of the poem reflect Marvell's having witnessed within two years everything from the gutting of the old house to the crowning of the new with its cupola. Reading Palladio would have allowed Marvell to imagine and deprecate the grand house-to-be even as he honored the humble house that still stood.

How Lord Fairfax would have taken the criticism in "Upon Appleton House" of Palladianism—and, by implication, of the new house he was beginning to build—remains a vexing question, though not fatal to an interpretation that honors the poem's fruitful ambiguity. Perhaps the poem was intended to memorialize a house to which Lord Fairfax had sentimental attachments, soon to be razed to make room for the grander house to be inherited by his daughter. It is not impossible to imagine some ambivalence on the owner's part about these changes. Indeed, Fairfax's own poem, "Upon the New-built House at Appleton," is hardly a ringing endorsement of the structure that had replaced his "favourite residence":

Thinke not o Man, that dwells herein  
This House a Stay but as an Inne  
Wch for Conuenience fittly stands  
In way to one not made wth hands  
But if a time here thou take Rest  
Yett thinke Eternity's the Best<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps he shared Marvell's misgivings about the new foreign style purveyed by Webb and advocated by Henry Fairfax. Marvell's aesthetic stance here is quite similar to that expressed in "The Mower Against Gardens," which arguably dates from his period at Nun Appleton. Surely if Lord Fairfax had lived to see more of his daughter's fruitless and unhappy marriage to the Duke of Buckingham, he might have ruefully reflected upon the almost prophetic implications of Marvell's sexual conceit: unlike the humble abode that "delights" the master (l. 56) and swells with his progeny, the "unproportioned" house "design[ed] in pain" (ll. 10 and 5), "where winds as he themselves may lose" (l. 20), will delight no master and give birth to no one.

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- <sup>1</sup> James G. Turner, "Upon Appleton House," *Notes & Queries* 222 (1977): 547-8.
- <sup>2</sup> *The Poems of Andrew Marvell*, ed. Nigel Smith, rev. ed. (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2007), 210-11. Marvell's poems are cited throughout from this edition.
- <sup>3</sup> Smith, ed., 216, nn. 2-4.
- <sup>4</sup> See Jane Partner, "'The Swelling Hall': Andrew Marvell and the Politics of Architecture at Appleton House," *Seventeenth Century* 23 (2008): 225-43.
- <sup>5</sup> Derek Hirst and Steven N. Zwicker have convincingly argued that the poem was composed during the summer of 1651 and virtually complete "by the end of the third week of August of that year" (14). The brevity of this composition time-line casts further doubt upon Partner's belief that Marvell could have witnessed both the subsuming of the old house and the crowning of the new with its cupola. See Hirst and Zwicker, *Andrew Marvell, Orphan of the Hurricane* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 12-15.
- <sup>6</sup> Partner 232; cf. Smith, ed., 211.
- <sup>7</sup> See Clements R. Markham, *A Life of the Great Lord Fairfax, Commander-in-Chief of the Army of the Parliament of England* (London: Macmillan, 1870), 20-23.
- <sup>8</sup> That the stanza would then be conveying a past event in the continuous present tense will at first glance appear problematic; however, in keeping with the suggestiveness of the imagery, the present tense indicates that the memory—and perhaps more than mere memory—of former pleasure is reawakened for Fairfax each time he enters the old house.
- <sup>9</sup> *Henry Fairfax papers*. MS Eng misc f17, (71v) 72. The Bodleian Library.
- <sup>10</sup> A full English translation would not be published until 1715. Inigo Jones's notes on the passage accurately summarize Palladio's text: "hales of 2 squares yoused by Palladio, . . . the nerer ye Come to a square ye Better." See *Inigo Jones on Palladio: Being the Notes by Inigo Jones in the copy of "I Quattro libri dell Architettura di Andrea Palladio," 1601, in the Library of Worcester College, Oxford* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Oriel Press, 1970).
- <sup>11</sup> "DELLE LOGGIE, DELL'ENTRATE, DELLE SALE, e delle stanze: & della forma loro." See *Inigo Jones on Palladio*, 52.
- <sup>12</sup> Roland Fréart de Chambray, *Les Quatre Livres De L'Architecture D'Andre Palladio. Mis en Francois* (Paris, 1650), Web. Cf. Pierre le Muet, *Traicté des cinq ordres d'architecture, desquels se sont seruy les anciens* (Paris, 1645), Web.
- <sup>13</sup> Special thanks to my colleague, Sharon Nell, Dean of Humanities, for her expert assessment of the French passage in Henry Fairfax's note.
- <sup>14</sup> In the light of what Hirst and Zwicker call Marvell's ideology of service to various patrons, and to Fairfax in particular, such an employment would not be far-fetched. They speculate that Marvell may even have "provided a connection, perhaps a service, which facilitated the tenorial and marital association of Buckingham and Fairfax in the 1650s" (35).
- <sup>15</sup> *The Poems of Thomas Third Lord Fairfax, From MS. Fairfax 40*, ed. Edward Bliss Reed (New Haven: Yale UP, 1909), 279. Web.