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Theater Reform and the Masque in Marvell's *Upon Appleton House*

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The signature scene shifts, pastoral settings, and perspectival instabilities of Andrew Marvell's *Upon Appleton House* squarely align the poem with the theatrical tradition of the court masque, a tradition that was effectively moribund at the time of the poem's composition in 1651. The influence of the masque on *Upon Appleton House* (and other Marvell works) has been widely noted, but the significance of his poem in the longer history of English theater—specifically, in the discourse of theatrical reform—has not been fully considered. In *Upon Appleton House*, Marvell not only applies the strategies and techniques of the masque, but he also engages with ideas central to the ongoing debate between opponents and defenders of the stage. As such, his poem anticipates the reforms and innovations attempted by William Davenant, Richard Flecknoe, and others who campaigned to revive theater in Interregnum England. However, Marvell's appropriation of masque theatrics is not tethered to the goals of reform. His poem is distinctly the product of the post-regicide, pre-Protectorate imagination, when the theaters are shuttered, dramatic performance is driven underground, and the fate of the Commonwealth is precarious. Accordingly, his method is not to establish a mode of theater palatable to republican interests, but instead to defamiliarize theatrical representation in a way that responds to the uncertainty of the moment.



I

As his tour of the grounds of Nun Appleton winds through the estate's neighboring wood, the speaker of Andrew Marvell's *Upon Appleton House* comes to fancy himself no mere observer but a veritable savant of Nature. The self-proclaimed "easy philosopher" (71.561) communes effortlessly with the birds and trees, their plumes and leaves revealing to him the wisdom of "Nature's mystic book" (73.584).¹ Basking in his newly realized prophetic powers, he marvels to find himself suddenly enveloped by his surroundings:

And see how Chance's better wit
 Could with a masque my studies hit!
 The oak leaves me embroider all,
 Between which caterpillars crawl:
 And ivy, with familiar trails,
 Me licks, and clasps, and curls, and hales.
 Under this antic cope I move
 Like some great prelate of the grove. (74.585-92)

To see his studies "hit" by "Chance's better wit" with a masque represents, in one sense, the happy confluence of aim and reward: the disciple of Nature receives his duly earned laurels, in the form of an all-encompassing physical and sensual immersion. Yet "hit" also connotes violent disruption: having perfected the art of sibylline divination, the speaker abruptly (albeit involuntarily) trades his ethical agency for bodily passivity. Like the decadent nuns who had made a play for young Isabel Thwaites, the speaker sloughs off monastic pretense and gives himself over to polymorphous pleasures and whimsical costume play. The erstwhile "easy philosopher," now draped sensuously in finery befitting a masque or interlude, has swiftly become "prelate of the grove."

Marvell's characterization of the episode as a "chance hit" alludes archly to Philip Sidney's discussion of the poet-as-vates in *The Defense of Poesy*.² Sidney cites the prevalent practice of *Sortes Virgilianae*, or divination by the works of Virgil, as evidence of the esteem in which poets were held by the imperial Romans:

¹ Andrew Marvell, *The Poems of Andrew Marvell*, rev. ed., ed. Nigel Smith (Harlow, England: Pearson Longman, 2007). All references to Marvell's poems are from this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text by stanza and line number.

² The allusion is suggested by Ann E. Berthoff in *The Resolved Soul: A Study of Marvell's Major Poems* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 184-85.

And so far were they carried into the admiration thereof, that they thought in the chanceable hitting upon any such verses great foretokens of their following fortunes were placed. Whereupon grew the word of *Sortes Virgilianae*, when by sudden opening Virgil's book they lighted upon any verse of his making, whereof the histories of the emperors' lives are full: as of Albinus, the governor of our island, who in his childhood met with this verse

Arma amens capio nec sat rationis in armis
and in his age performed it.³

In the logic of the *Sortes Virgilianae*, Sidney explains, Virgil's books are fraught with prophetic import. When readers turn to a page at random, they find their fates duly foretold there; the vatic authority entrusted to the poet elevates "chanceable hitting" above rank speculation. Marvell's speaker approaches the book of Nature with similar reverence, expecting actionable intelligence as the sortilege practitioners did with Virgil. He is, instead, overwhelmed with inducements to leisure and artifice, all gathered under the pretext of masque. If the British governor Albinus "performed" the bellicose motto revealed to him by the *Aeneid* and hence fulfilled the prophecy inscribed therein, Marvell's speaker is groomed for a different kind of performance, one that harnesses the unexpected chemistry of oracle and spectacle.

I highlight the episode because, in addition to being the sole reference by name to masquing in *Upon Appleton House*, it encapsulates the poem's uniquely intimate engagement with the masque tradition. The speaker's ability to channel a bombardment of stimuli into an impromptu burlesque of prelatical pomp suggests not just a keen improvisational aptitude, but also the lingering vitality—and surprising proximity—of this seemingly passé mode in 1651. A decade removed from its Caroline vogue, the masquing habit remains warm and familiar and inhabitable, albeit prone to the strangeness that hangs about the not-long-forgotten past. In time Marvell would gain firsthand experience with producing a masque, contributing two songs to the wedding celebrations for Mary Cromwell and Lord Fauconberg in 1657. The two songs trade on nostalgia for the erotic pastoralism of the Elizabethan and early Stuart courts, providing a telling glimpse into the aristocratic proclivities of the Protectoral regime. *Upon Appleton House* presents a more ambivalent reckoning with the masque and its legacies. Critics have long noted Marvell's use of masque conventions and devices in *Upon Appleton House*, including seminal treatments by Ann E. Berthoff and Rosalie Colie, who

³ Philip Sidney, *Sir Philip Sidney: The Oxford Authors*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 214-15.

both remark the poem's intricate staging of a "masque of nature."⁴ Muriel Bradbrook suggests that Marvell infuses the poem with the energy of an "obsolete political rite," that masque (along with pastoral, its close cousin) operates within his verse as a kind of "undersong" whose residual presence collides with the political realities of post-Civil War England to produce "tragic ironies."⁵ Leah Marcus holds that "Marvell's is a masque that undoes masquing," with the poet mimicking the movements of the masque while signaling the loss of the idyllic milieu that birthed them. "The Cavalier paradise cannot escape the 'fallen' world of political conflict," writes Marcus, "but must bow to its reforging energies to emerge something other, quite new."⁶

Two more recent studies point to a stark presentism that underlies the poem's attempts to navigate the aftermath of the civil wars. In an illuminating article on the sounds of *Upon Appleton House*, Gary Kuchar explores how the soundscapes of the poem immerse the speaker in the particularities of the Yorkshire landscape, engaging his senses with an acuteness that at once invites and frustrates metahistorical interpretation. For Kuchar the poem is an effort to give aesthetic form to real-time disorientation, less about generating meaning than evoking presence.⁷ In *Lyric Apocalypse*, Ryan Netzley similarly notes Marvell's embrace of radical immanence in *Upon Appleton House*, wherein the poem's abstruse symbols are themselves events—not figures waiting to be decoded, but rather "executions of force" whose revelatory impact is felt in the here and now.⁸ Netzley and Kuchar posit different arguments, but what they share is a sense that Marvell's poem registers profound unease with stabilizing narratives that seek to organize perception along the lines of a knowable, preordained history. Marvell respects the force of received pasts and imagined futures, but sees when they refuse to take their place in an orderly and intelligible chronology. In this regard the conceit of the found masque is instructive, as it epitomizes the twin forces of familiarity and disruption that lend the poem its constitutive dynamic. The chance hit that Marvell's speaker absorbs in the Appleton wood may be viewed as a backdoor entry into the wider theatrical discourse of the revolutionary period, in all of its inchoate variety. Marvell's participation in this discourse has not been fully

⁴ See Berthoff, *Resolved Soul*, 163; and Rosalie Colie, "My Echoing Song": *Andrew Marvell's Poetry of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 214.

⁵ Muriel Bradbrook, "Marvell and the Masque," in *Tercentenary Essays in Honor of Andrew Marvell*, ed. Kenneth Friedenreich (Hamden, Ct.: Archon, 1977), 210.

⁶ Leah Marcus, *The Politics of Mirth: Jonson, Herrick, Milton, Marvell, and the Defense of Old Holiday Pastimes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 240–41.

⁷ See Gary Kuchar, "The Sounds of Appleton House: Andrew Marvell's Poetic Audioscapes," *Modern Philology* 116, no. 4 (2019): 375.

⁸ Ryan Netzley, *Lyric Apocalypse: Milton, Marvell, and the Nature of Events* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 183.

acknowledged, despite the notice given to his careful deployment of aural and visual techniques in *Upon Appleton House* and other works. Marvell's verse descriptions not only approximate the effects of the court masque, but they also prefigure its dispersal into a tangle of theatrical idioms during the 1650s. Furthermore, they show the poet staking a claim in moral and representational debates that, in short time, would be taken up under the overtly political banner of theatrical reform.

In this respect, *Upon Appleton House* is of a piece with the work of the musical dramatists Richard Flecknoe and William Davenant, each of whom aims to supplant an effectively moribund apparatus—the court masque—with something other and new. Flecknoe's and Davenant's efforts to produce a mode of dramatic representation palatable to Protectorate interests result in the invention of English opera, heralded in retrospect as the heir to the masque. Marvell works largely within the same dramatic idiom in his poem, but without the same ambitions or pretenses. For him, the masque serves as an apparatus of defamiliarization, not as the touchstone for a reformed theater. Marvell is unconcerned with instrumental political ends, although as a poet seeking patronage, he almost certainly begrudged the personal successes enjoyed by Flecknoe and Davenant. In "Flecknoe, an English Priest at Rome," Marvell satirizes Flecknoe's verse as mercenary hackwork. In *Upon Appleton House*, he takes subtler but no less potent aim at Davenant's *Gondibert*, as Nigel Smith explains:

Marvell is replying to Sir William Davenant's recently published heroic poem *Gondibert* (1651), with its pretentious claims of producing epic literature on subjects distanced from the present time, its grand claims for poetry as high architecture (to be read by princes only), its preference for books (as opposed to the book of nature), and the influence in its preface of Hobbes's psychological and political theories. To all of these themes, *Upon Appleton House* replies in the negative.⁹

If *Gondibert* reaches for timelessness, *Upon Appleton House* is manifestly an artifact of the pre-Protectorate imagination, a case that Derek Hirst and Steven N. Zwicker have made by dating the poem to the "high summer" of 1651, when the prospect of incursion by Charles II and the Scottish Covenanters put the survival and legitimacy of the republic in real danger. Marvell's poem, they assert, is inflected at every turn by a respect for the radically contingent nature of the historical moment.¹⁰ In this unsettled climate, Marvell's appropriation of politically marked but functionally ambiguous theatrical

⁹ Nigel Smith, "'Mirrored Doubles': Andrew Marvell, The Remaking of Poetry and the Poet's Career," in *Classical Literary Careers and Their Reception*, ed. Philip Hardie and Helen Moore (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 229.

¹⁰ See Derek Hirst and Steven N. Zwicker, *Andrew Marvell, Orphan of the Hurricane* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 9–40.

materials serves an important role. It fleshes out the fitful movement from the Caroline court masque to the post-courtly dramatic innovations of the Interregnum. If the poem does not complete the story of how the English theater was made safe for Protectorate sensibilities, it illustrates vividly how that outcome was not guaranteed.

II

In his 2017 study of masque and opera in Cromwellian and Restoration England, Andrew Walkling provides a useful synopsis of the differences between the two forms. According to Walkling, the “classic” Stuart court masque as devised by Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones consisted of

regicentric rhetoric couched in an entertainment focused on non-speaking courtly performers and largely devoid of conventional narrative structures. The masque was fundamentally declaratory rather than expository, existing outside of the Aristotelian strictures on “poetic” (*i.e.* dramatic) propriety, and drawing its authority from a Renaissance mythos of divinely ordained royal majesty and power.¹¹

Opera, meanwhile,

reflected a contrary effort not to cast off the classical conventions of drama but rather to heighten them, deploying music as a means to enhance dramatic “speech” by articulating the passions of onstage characters, thereby elevating the audience’s response. Opera’s use of expressive musical gestures, including its deployment of the new “technology” of recitative, sets it apart from the masque, where forms of tuneful air and speech-inflected declamation similarly coexist, but with an entirely different purpose, namely to craft a musical language whose character is ceremonial rather than emotive.¹²

Walkling illustrates that the distinction between masque and opera was real but not absolute, as English operatists absorbed masque influences such as “employment of music, scenic sophistication, pastoral and Olympian characters and themes, heightened poetic language, and even the upended world of the antimasque.”¹³ The chief influence of the masque, he observes, was theatrical rather than musical, owing to the difficulty of translating Italian recitative to an English idiom as well as entrenched skepticism of dramatic narratives in musical settings. And in the 1650s, the masque “dropped

¹¹ Andrew R. Walkling, *Masque and Opera in England, 1656–1688* (London: Routledge, 2017), 8.

¹² *Ibid.*, 8–9.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 11.

much of its explicitly courtly rhetoric,” Walkling explains, “moving instead into the realm of morality and employing a more conventional dialogic and hence dramatic idiom.”¹⁴

Walkling’s portrait of an intentional yet indeterminate movement toward dramatic reform can be seen in the works of Flecknoe and Davenant, two figures who not only navigated the era’s restrictions on performance but actively fashioned themselves as reformers. Of the two, Flecknoe’s productions were less celebrated and hardly performed, but no less varied or ambitious. In 1654 he published the play *Love’s Dominion a Dramatique Piece Full of Excellent Morality, Written as a Pattern for the Reformed Stage*, whose scenic framework, musical interludes, pastoral milieu, and deference to the cult of love plainly evoke the masque even as Flecknoe presents the work as something more novel. The play’s title encapsulates the tenor of stage representation during the early years of the Protectorate: broadly moralizing and nominally “dramatic,” but generically fluid. In the preface, Flecknoe links reform of the stage to reform of the pulpit, “where of late there has been uttered more scandalous and libellous stuff, than ever yet was uttered on the Stage.”¹⁵ He argues that seeing and hearing dramatic works in performance makes audiences more receptive to religious instruction:

Devotion, (like gilding to matter) cleaving not, nor sticking to rough and unpolish’d minds, unlesse they be first prepared with politeness of manners, and the tincture of good education, for the receiving it; which is best taught on the *Theater*, by how much those precepts move the mind more forcibly and efficaciously, which besides the allowance of the *Ear*, have a powerfull recommendation of the *Eye*.¹⁶

Flecknoe breaks more cleanly from the masque tradition in another dramatic work he produces in 1654, *Ariadne Deserted by Theseus and Found and Courted by Bacchus*. Billed as “a dramattick piece apted for recitative musick,” *Ariadne Deserted* shares credit with Davenant’s *The Siege of Rhodes* (1656) as the first opera written in English. Flecknoe prefaces the work by stressing the emotive force of music combined with verse, as epitomized by Italian recitative. He strives to create a native recitative style that retains the force of the Italian despite the limitations of the comparatively feeble English language, whose “words die in a manner as soon as born, not being able scarcely to

¹⁴ Ibid., 9.

¹⁵ Richard Flecknoe, *Love’s dominion, a dramatique piece full of excellent morality, written as a pattern for the reformed stage* (London, 1654), sig. A5v.

¹⁶ Ibid., sig. A4v–A5r. Flecknoe’s arguments for the edifying effects of theater belong to a long humanist tradition of dramatic theory and advocacy; as Susan Wiseman has shown, they also are likely informed by contemporaneous French debates over the role of theater. See Wiseman, *Drama and Politics in the English Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 132–33.

brook the air.”¹⁷ In *Love’s Dominion*, Flecknoe nods to the socially salutary effects of drama, whereas here his aim is narrower: he submits recitative as an inherently regal idiom, whose effects are reserved accordingly:

Tis many years since I proposed unto a Sovereign Prince the congruity, that as their persons, so their Musick should be elevated above the Vulgar, and made not only to delight the ear but also their understandings; not patcht up with Songs of different subjects, but all of one piece, with design and plot, accommodated to their several dispositions, and occasions; which they then graciously pleased to be inclined to hearken to, when the intervening of certain unexpected accidents, diverted their ears from it.¹⁸

If Flecknoe’s elevated conception of drama seems occasionally at odds with the goal of reestablishing theater as a public institution, Davenant provides an example of practical and sustained engagement with the realities of theatrical production during the Interregnum. Davenant, with his record of service to the first and second Charles as well as the Lord Protector, serves as a bellwether for the fortunes of mid-seventeenth-century English drama. He emerged as the premier dramatist of the Caroline era, writing works for both the court and the public stage and serving as courtier to Henrietta Maria. By 1639 Davenant had secured a patent from the king to build a theater near Fleet Street that, unlike other public theaters, would accommodate stage scenery.¹⁹ The patent was withdrawn within months, and the ensuing decade saw Davenant’s theatrical career come to a halt, starting with the outbreak of war and closure of the theaters, and culminating in his arrest and imprisonment by parliamentary forces in 1650.

On his release from the Tower in 1652, Davenant set out to revive public theater amid a vastly shrunken cultural landscape. In the short tract *A Proposition for Advancement of Moraltie, By a new way of Entertainment of the People* (1653), Davenant tests the waters for the musico-theatrical experiments he would assay in the late 1650s, including *The Siege of Rhodes*. Davenant grants the view of the antitheatricalists that human beings are supremely impressionable. But if presented with models worthy of emulation, he

¹⁷ Flecknoe, *Ariadne deserted by Theseus and found and courted by Bacchus. A dramattick piece apted for recitative musick* (London, 1654), sig. A5v.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, sig. A3r–v.

¹⁹ See Dawn Lewcock, *Sir William Davenant, the Court Masque, and the English Seventeenth-Century Scenic Stage, c. 1605–c. 1700* (Amherst, N.Y.: Cambria, 2008), 21. For extracts from the patent awarded to Davenant by Charles I, see *English Professional Theatre, 1530–1660*, ed. Glynne Wickham, Herbert Berry, and William Ingram (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 130.

holds, the senses may be entry points of civilizing, not contaminating influence.²⁰ In view of this potential, Davenant proposes the establishment of a public playhouse for the common people,

where their Eyes might be subdu'd with *Heroicall Pictures* and change of *Scenes*, their Eares civiliz'd with Musick and wholesome discourses, by some *Academie* where may be presented in a Theater severall ingenious *Mechanicks*, as *Motion* and *Transposition of Lights*, to make a more naturall resemblance of the great and vertuous Actions of such as are eminent in Story; without any scandalous disguising of men in womens habits, as have bin us'd in Playes; the former would not onely divert the people from disorder, but by degrees enamour them with consideration of the conveniencies and protections of Government.²¹

As James R. Jacob and Timothy Raylor have argued, Davenant's views are shaped significantly by debates occurring in the Cavendish and Hartlib circles in the late 1640s and early 1650s, and particularly by the sensationalist psychology of his friend Thomas Hobbes, whose ideas figured prominently in those debates.²² Most human beings, Davenant writes, are moved by sensory experience, not speculative reasoning; hence the goal of inciting them to virtue "can be compass'd no other way then by surprisall of their Eyes and Ears."²³ Accordingly, scene changes are of crucial importance. While the connoisseur class or "*Virtuosi*" may be moved by silent and static representations such as buildings, pictures, statues, medals, "common soules" require sound and movement: triumphs, pageants, cavalcades. These bustling entertainments induce what Davenant calls "abject admiration," an experience of strangeness or novelty that stirs the senses yet never rises to the level of curiosity.²⁴ By applying the kaleidoscopic

²⁰ Davenant's interest in the stage as a means to promote social and political order is shared by earlier theater defenders such as Thomas Heywood, who observes the capacity of plays "to teach the subjects obedience to their King, to shew the people the vntimely ends of such as haue moued tumults, commotions, and insurrections, to present them with the flourishing estate of such as liue in obedience, exhorting them to allegeance, dehorting them from all trayterous and felonious stratagems." See Heywood, *An apology for actors Containing three briefe treatises. 1 Their antiquity. 2 Their ancient dignity. 3 The true vse of their quality* (London, 1612), sig. F3v.

²¹ William Davenant, *A proposition for advancement of moralitie, by a new way of entertainment of the people* (London, 165[3/4]), 14–15.

²² James R. Jacob and Timothy Raylor, "Opera and Obedience: Thomas Hobbes and *A Proposition for Advancement of Moralitie* by Sir William Davenant," *The Seventeenth Century* 6, no. 2 (1991): 215–33.

²³ Davenant, *Proposition*, 11.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 10–11. Jacob and Raylor note that Davenant's notion of admiration as specific to the common people is his own invention: "For Hobbes, curiosity follows inevitably and in all people from admiration. ... Davenant, however, introduces a class distinction ... [which] grafts a reading of Hobbesian psychology on to traditional aristocratic-humanist assumptions about the effects of theatre on different classes." See "Opera and Obedience," 224.

effects of the masque to exclusively heroic subject matter, the reformed theater would effectively bedazzle its audience into submission to the state.

While Davenant's vision of a state-sponsored public theater would not come to fruition until the Restoration, it was partly realized in the operatic entertainments he produced in the late 1650s, which featured the kind of scenic variations and exemplary heroics he championed in *A Proposition*. The first of these productions, the 1656 *First Days Entertainment at Rutland-House*, was staged in the makeshift private theater that Davenant erected in the back room of his home. Davenant weaves the case for "Publique Entertainment by Moral Representations" into the work's declamatory dialogue, by way of a debate between Diogenes the Cynic and Aristophanes the playwright.²⁵ Diogenes rails at the deceitfulness of music, poetry, and scenes—that is, the accouterments of theater—and proclaims the virtues of darkness, quiet, and solitude. Aristophanes chides the tub-bound philosopher for his antisocial proclivities. On the worthiness of scenes, Diogenes asks his audience:

Would you meet to be delighted with Scænes? which is, to be entertain'd with the deception of motion, and transposition of Lights; where, whilst you think you see a great Battel, you are sure to get nothing by the Victory. You gaze on imaginary Woods and Medows, where you can neither fell nor mowe. On Seas, where you have no Ships, and on Rivers, where you catch no Fish.²⁶

Diogenes identifies the void at the heart of representation. One cannot fell a wood, mow a meadow, or fish a river that isn't there. His skepticism of painted scenes and moving lights follows the Hobbesian, anti-essentialist view that the nature of things is unknowable by the senses; to quote Hobbes directly, "motion produces nothing but motion. ... the object is one thing, the image or fancy is another."²⁷ Aristophanes grants that sensory impressions are deceiving. But he divests this premise of its cynicism, insisting:

Nor is that deception where we are prepar'd and consent to be deceiv'd. Nor is there much loss in that deceit, where we gain some variety of experience by a short journey of the sight. When [Diogenes] gives you advice not to lay out time in prospect of Woods and Medows, which you can never possess, he may as well shut up his

²⁵ Davenant, *The first days entertainment at Rutland-House, by declamations and musick: after the manner of the ancients* (London, 1656), 2.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁷ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan, Parts I and II*, ed. Herbert W. Schneider (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958), 26.

own little Window (which is the Bung-hole of his Tub) and still remain in the dark, because the light can only shew him that which he can neither purchase nor beg.²⁸

In *A Proposition*, the audience was presumed defenseless before the deceiving effects of sound and motion, whereas here Davenant trusts that his audience may prepare *and* consent to be deceived. The ancient Athenians are ostensibly a more sophisticated lot than the English, who are presented as tools of the Cromwellian state apparatus.

Over the remainder of the decade, Davenant would go on to produce three more dramas: *The Siege of Rhodes*, *The Cruelty of the Spaniards in Peru*, and *The History of Sir Francis Drake*. Weaving continental operatic influences into established dramaturgical forms, these works comprise a case study in subverting the era's restrictions on theatrical performance. And all three would be revived at the Restoration, attesting to the long influence of innovations born of necessity as well as underscoring Janet Clare's assessment of Davenant's work as "a truly transitional moment in the materials and aesthetics of dramatic production."²⁹ Thanks to Clare and other scholars of seventeenth-century theater, the oft-overlooked legacy of Interregnum drama has been justly acknowledged.³⁰ In addition to the creation of English opera, this legacy includes the rise of women actors, the turn to indoor playhouses, and the expanded use of painted and perspective scenery—significantly, all developments that date to the Caroline court masque. The persistence of the masque influence in republican theater arguably constitutes a more compelling narrative than the movement for reform, which promised to root out the abuses of the pre-Civil War stage and edify the masses but settled into a more familiar role of generating profitable, largely apolitical entertainments for connoisseur audiences, or what Katrin Beushausen calls "theatre without theatricality."³¹

Yet, if the reform movement of the 1650s did not fundamentally reshape prior notions of theater and theatricality, the reckoning it occasioned was robust. And Marvell's role in this reckoning is illuminating, as his poem approaches the state of post-Civil War

²⁸ Davenant, *First Days Entertainment*, 38.

²⁹ Janet Clare, "Countering Anti-Theatricality: Davenant and the Drama of the Protectorate," in *The Oxford Handbook of Literature and the English Revolution*, ed. Laura Lunger Knoppers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 512.

³⁰ In addition to Janet Clare's *Drama of the English Republic, 1649–1660: Plays and Entertainments* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002) and the aforementioned books by Wiseman (*Drama and Politics in the English Civil War*) and Walkling (*Masque and Opera in England*), other important studies of Interregnum drama include Katrin Beushausen, *Theatre and the English Public from Reformation to Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Dale B. J. Randall, *Winter Fruit: English Drama 1642–1660* (Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 1995); and Alfred Harbage, *Cavalier Drama: An Historical and Critical Supplement to the Study of the Elizabethan and Restoration Stage* (New York: Modern Language Association, 1936).

³¹ Beushausen, *Theatre and the English Public*, 265. For a full discussion of theater reform under the Protectorate, see 250–267.

theatricality—in particular, the afterlife of the masque—in ways that are not evident or admissible in the later campaign for the restitution of theater. Marvell was not alone in his exploration of dissident theatricalities. The royalist “pamphlet plays” of the 1640s and 1650s, for example, provided a vehicle for theatrical (and often scurrilous) expression in the absence of authorized venues for public performance.³² However, those works are chiefly anti-reformist—that is, marked by reactive antagonism toward the politicization of the stage—whereas Marvell actively engages with the issues and debates that would animate the reform movements. His poem rehearses ideas that would be streamlined by Davenant, Flecknoe, and other personages who lobbied to revive public performance. At the same time, the poem serves as a counterpoint to the reform narrative, as a determinedly immediate conceptualization of the theatrical sphere. This is apparent in the opening stanzas of the poem, in which the speaker’s advocacy for classical principles of design threatens to buckle beneath the weight of its own pretensions. Appleton House is introduced as an exemplar of architectural decorum befitting the humility and pragmatism of its proprietor, Lord Fairfax. These virtues are typified by the “sober frame” of the edifice:

Within this sober frame expect
 Work of no foreign architect;
 That unto caves the quarries drew,
 And forests did to pastures hew;
 Who of his great design in pain
 Did for a model vault his brain,
 Whose columns should so high be raised
 To arch the brows that on them gazed. (1.1-8)

Through negative description redolent of the opening of Ben Jonson’s “To Penshurst,” the first stanza efficiently captures the perils of conceptual overreach. Yet where Jonson’s lines coolly observe Penshurst’s aversion to opulent display, Marvell’s verge on polemic, with the speaker pitting Appleton House against the work of the dubious “foreign architect” whose grandiose aesthetic pains creator and spectator alike. Elizabeth T. Jordan argues that Marvell’s poem draws from the new classicism of Inigo Jones, which stresses the application of classical design principles such as harmony, proportion, and decorum across disciplines.³³ That influence coalesces in the image of the sober frame, which evokes not only the modest dimensions of the house, but also

³² On royalist pamphlet plays, see Beushausen, *Theatre and the English Public*, 222–49.

³³ Elizabeth T. Jordan, “Inigo Jones and the Architecture of Poetry,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (1991): 280–319, esp. 299–300.

the proscenium stage (another Jones innovation), as well as the poem itself. Together, these framing devices invite us to view the work simultaneously as architecture, theater, and poetry.

The organic unity of this spectacle is, however, suspect. Appleton's sober frame fits Fairfax's humble nature, yet in trying to contain his magnificence the "laden house" (6.49) sweats and swells, manifestly unsober mannerisms. The speaker rationalizes this anomaly partly by proverbializing ("Height with a certain grace does bend, / But low things clownishly ascend" [8.59-60]), partly by deflecting to an imagined past and future in which Fairfax's towering stature passes safely into legend. In stanza four he recalls a "more sober age and mind, / When larger-sized men did stoop / To enter at a narrow loop" (4.28-30); in stanza five he envisions an "after age" when visitors to the house will marvel at "how their extent / Within such dwarfish confines went" (5.37-38). These attempts to normalize Fairfax point up the strangeness of the moment, in which a dwelling praised for its commodiousness is palpably stressed by its model tenant. The effect is comparable to what Davenant describes in the preface to *The Siege of Rhodes*, a work that, like *The First Days Entertainment*, was performed in the Rutland House theater that he had built in his home amid restrictions on public performance. Davenant laments having to scale back the visuals, music, and narrative to fit the diminutive Rutland House stage, which ill suits the heroic subject matter: "This is so narrow an allowance for the Fleet of *Solyman* the Magnificent, his Army, the Island of *Rhodes*, and the varieties attending the Siege of the City; that I fear you will think we invite you to such a contracted trifle as that of the *Caesars* carv'd upon a Nut."³⁴ Davenant hopes to compensate for the small size of the room "by containing in it so much as could be conveniently accomplisht by Art and Industry: which will not be doubted in the Scenes by those who can judg that kind of Illustration and know the excellency of Mr. *John Web*, who design'd and order'd it."³⁵

The use of perspectival scenery (or "Art and Industry") as a corrective to the physical limitations of the stage is, in some sense, the very animus of theater. This is especially true of the court masque, which boasted scenic effects surpassing those of the commercial playhouses. Noteworthy here is the mention of the architect John Webb, the Jones disciple and collaborator who, in addition to contributing scene designs to Davenant's masques and related entertainments, was commissioned by Fairfax to renovate Nun Appleton House in the early 1650s. Under Jones's tutelage, Webb became conversant in the production and design techniques of the court masque, including

³⁴ Davenant, *The siege of Rhodes made a representation by the art of prospective in scenes, and the story sung in recitative musick. At the back part of Rutland-House in the upper end of Aldersgate-Street, London* (London, 1656), sig. A2v.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, sig. A3r.

what Jane Partner calls the “extreme perspectival illusionism” that, during the leadup to civil war, was deployed to burnish the myth of an idyllic royalism.³⁶ Marvell, according to Partner, applies similar optical tricks to different ends in *Upon Appleton House*, ironically channeling Webb’s expertise to stress the uncertainty of appearances and allegiances in the post-regicide landscape.³⁷ Partner locates this effect in the later stanzas of the poem, but it is also richly evident in stanza ten, where the speaker prepares to commence his tour of the estate grounds:

But Nature here hath been so free
As if she said, ‘Leave this to me’.
Art would more neatly have defaced
What she had laid so sweetly waste;
In fragrant gardens, shady woods,
Deep meadows, and transparent floods. (10.75–80)

Surveying the entirety of the estate, the speaker assumes something akin to the perspectival privilege of the monarch at court, for whom the spatial and optical illusions of the masque achieve their optimal effect.³⁸ The speaker asserts that the landscape of Nun Appleton is the design of nature, and by extension, not the work of art. But the functionalities he ascribes to them, both premised on a curious combination of elegance and destruction, are strikingly similar; this is reinforced by the internal and end rhymes of “neatly have defaced” and “laid so sweetly waste.” As a result, it is unclear who is responsible for the splendors and ravages recounted in lines 79 and 80. Nature and art are implicated in one another’s work despite the speaker’s outward claims to the contrary; he will experience that confusion firsthand once he sets foot in the grounds.

The repeated stresses that crop up in the staid facade of Nun Appleton suggest that, no matter how elegant the staging of Fairfax’s country house and its environs, the figure at their center remains an uneasy fit. While Marvell enlists the panegyric stagecraft of the masque to create a timeless portrait of Fairfax’s heroism and humility, he wields the same tools to magnify the contradictions of the moment, not the least of which is the commission of a royalist architect and stage designer by a retired parliamentary general. The vitality of the masque endures in the post-theater world, but the field of representation has been fundamentally altered; there is no exalted perspective that

³⁶ Jane Partner, “The Swelling Hall: Andrew Marvell and the Politics of Architecture at Nun Appleton House,” *The Seventeenth Century* 23, no. 2 (2008): 237.

³⁷ Partner, “Swelling Hall,” 238. See also the same author’s *Poetry and Vision in Early Modern England* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 154–68.

³⁸ For a discussion of how perspective settings at court performances centered the king, see Stephen Orgel, *The Illusion of Power: Political Theater in the English Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 10–11.

can synthesize the competing elements on the ground into a consistent and totalizing illusion. For Davenant in 1656 this reality registers plainly, and informs his pragmatic approach to the stage. In print he bills *The Siege of Rhodes* as “a representation by the art of prospective in scenes, and the story sung in recitative musick,” effectively casting the work as a deconstructed masque to circumvent the theater ban. (Tellingly, the work is entered as a masque in the Stationers’ Register, as if tacitly acknowledging the subterfuge.³⁹) Davenant trusts that exquisite scenes will help make up for the lack of space at Rutland House but concedes that any defects “are chiefly such, as you cannot reform but onely with your Purse; that is, by building us a larger Room.”⁴⁰ The quip is indicative of the twofold challenge that Davenant would face in his ongoing attempts to revive theater: abiding by the physical and aesthetic constraints of the Protectorate stage while chasing after an increasingly commercial and ideological notion of reform.⁴¹

III

The example of Davenant is instructive because it makes explicit both the connections and pressure points in the evolution from the extravagant Caroline court masque to the comparatively austere Cromwellian opera; his creative vision is guided, often restrained, by political necessity. If Marvell makes similar concessions in his poem, he is noticeably less wary of the distortions and disorientations that might appear as a result. Put another way, if Davenant fears that the diminution of Suleiman’s siege to the scale of “the *Caesars* carv’d upon a Nut” will depress the salutary effects the audience stands to gain from the depiction of heroic virtue, Marvell implies that such “contracted trifles” possess a power of their own. His account of the Fairfax family’s acquisition of Nun Appleton, for example, reimagines the perfectly expedient marriage of Sir William Fairfax to Isabel Thwaites as an heroic defense of the faith. In stanzas eleven to thirty-five, the speaker describes young Isabel being accosted by “subtle nuns” (12.94) who entice her to a life of dubiously twinned piety and pleasure. William, after mulling whether to intervene by law or force, breaches the cloister and rescues his bride-to-be, leaving the nuns doubly bereft:

But the glad youth away her bears,
And to the nuns bequeath her tears:
Who guiltily their prize bemoan,

³⁹ See Stephen Watkins, “The Protectorate Playhouse: William Davenant’s Cockpit in the 1650s,” *Shakespeare Bulletin* 37, no. 1 (2019): 91.

⁴⁰ Davenant, *Siege of Rhodes*, sig. A2r.

⁴¹ On Davenant’s repeated efforts to petition Cromwell’s Council of State for a return of public theater, see Clare, “Countering Anti-Theatricality,” 503–6.

Like gypsies that a child had stol'n.
 Thenceforth (as when th' enchantment ends,
 The castle vanishes or rends)
 The wasting cloister with the rest
 Was in one instant dispossessed. (34.265-72)

The episode is notable for a number of reasons: the frank lesbian eroticism of the nun's appeal to Isabel; the extensive space (100 lines) given to this appeal, indefinitely muting the voice of the speaker; and the comically militaristic rendering of William's raid on the cloister, which turns on the grotesquery of a dauntless Protestant hero vanquishing hapless, makeshift warrior nuns. A. D. Cousins views the episode's "extravagant, dismissive comedy" as bordering on farce, albeit with a serious purpose: it allows Marvell to contrast "a Protestant eutopia that has evolved through to the Republican present with a Catholic dystopia of the distant, and perhaps not quite so distant, monarchic past."⁴² Others have noted the episode's debt to romance, particularly the closing image comparing the dissolved priory to a vanishing castle.⁴³ This image just as powerfully evokes the masque—specifically, the rapid disappearing acts that could be staged through flexible setting devices such as the turning machine (*machina versatilis*) and tractable scene (*scena ductilis*). In Jonson and Jones's *Masque of Blackness* (1609), the grotesque movements and charms of the witches are suddenly wiped out by the appearance of the virtuous House of Fame masquers, producing what Stephen Orgel and Roy Strong describe as a "total metamorphosis" in which Jones's stagecraft realizes Jonson's moral vision.⁴⁴ Marvell effects a similar transformation in the nunnery episode: countering the antimasque of the nuns with William's hesitant but valiant defense of Isabel and the true faith, and figuring victory as annihilation.

Although Marvell's account of the Fairfax dynasty's origins has scattered basis in fact, its effusive, genre-less theatricality suits the rhetorical situation the poet finds himself in and the specific act of mythmaking it entails. The marriage of William and Isabel preceded the dissolution of Nun Appleton by twenty years, yet they occur synchronously in Marvell's formulation. As a result, the acquisition of the priory comes to form a seminal link in Fairfax and Reformation history. The legacy of William

⁴² A. D. Cousins, *Andrew Marvell: Loss and Aspiration, Home and Homeland in Miscellaneous Poems* (London: Routledge, 2016), 202.

⁴³ See James Kuzner, *Open Subjects: English Renaissance Republicans, Modern Selfhoods, and the Virtue of Vulnerability* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 142; Jenna Lay, *Beyond the Cloister: Catholic Englishwomen and Early Modern Literary Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 142; and Graham Hammill, *The Mosaic Constitution: Political Theology and Imagination from Machiavelli to Milton* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 189.

⁴⁴ Stephen Orgel and Roy Strong, *Inigo Jones: The Theatre of the Stuart Court*, vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 21.

Fairfax, “whose offspring fierce / Shall fight through all the universe” (31.242-43), is emblazoned in the gardens of Nun Appleton, which are laid out “[i]n the just figure of a fort” (36.286) and done up in full military pageantry and regalia. The bellicose conceit is tempered by nostalgia for a prelapsarian symbology of war, when “[t]he gard’ner had the soldier’s place, / And his more gentle forts did trace” (43.337-38). By casting the militarized gardens as a fundamentally innocent figuration, Marvell substantiates the Fairfacian archetype of the reluctant warrior, the gardener pressed into soldier’s service. If in summer 1651 Lord Fairfax’s principled withdrawal from public life increasingly comes across as an untimely pacifism—if the moment seems to call for a soldier, not a gardener—Marvell reminds his reader that the two are inextricable. Even amid the garden’s edenic visage, Appleton’s “invisible artillery” (46.362) seems trained on the former episcopal residence and royalist stronghold of Cawood Castle, a sign of the retired general’s readiness to engage.

At the outset of his walking tour, Marvell’s speaker suggested that nature had wrested control of the grounds and gardens from art (“Leave this to me”), setting the stage for a continuation of the “sober frame” narrative of the first ten stanzas. What has emerged instead is a wide-ranging experiment in spectatorial subjectivity, in which Marvell continually tests the bounds of decorum and the dynamics of perspective. The next frame of the poem—the speaker’s progress through the scenic topography of Nun Appleton—forms an even more searching exploration of theatrical sensibility and affect. The meadows and woods of Nun Appleton are the site of the most sudden and dramatic scene shifts in the poem; they serve not merely as pastoral or topographical settings, but as crucibles of ethical experience. Notably, meadows and woods are also cited as illusion-prone spaces in Davenant’s *First Days Entertainment*, the focal point of Diogenes’s fears and Aristophanes’s hopes for the impressionable spectator. The difference in Marvell’s poem is that his speaker is embedded in those spaces, both viewing and participating in the masque-like spectacles around him. The movement from the garden to the meadow commences with the assertion of the lyric voice: “And now to the abyss I pass” (47.369), effectively declaring the speaker’s heightened implication in the action of the poem. On entering the meadow, he finds himself instantly engulfed in “unfathomable grass,” where men “like grasshoppers appear” and “grasshoppers are giants” (47.371-72). Colie situates the quick metamorphoses and scalar shifts that occur in the meadow scenes within a variety of seventeenth-century visual traditions—not just the masque, but also catoptric and magic lantern displays, which projected serial images that permitted the viewer to “stand passive before shifts of scene.”⁴⁵ Such displays, Colie explains, did not require the viewer to

⁴⁵ Colie, “My Echoing Song,” 210.

make physical or mental adjustments to organize these images into a synthetic whole. When the speaker remarks, “No scene that turns with engines strange / Does oft’ner than these meadows change” (49.385-86), he not only makes explicit the functional likeness of the meadow to the masque and adjacent optical technologies. He lets us into a kind of Hobbesian fever dream, where motion is so profuse that it can scarcely be imagined to produce anything but image or fancy.

The depiction of the meadow is tantamount to what Davenant had in mind in *A Proposition*—rapid scene changes that would stun the viewer into submission—only instead of portraying heroic virtues worthy of emulation, Marvell delivers a densely layered mock-heroic poem that confounds the relationship between scene and spectator. The entry of the “tawny mowers,” who cut through the “green sea” of grass and thus “seem like Israelites to be” (49.389-90), sets the stage for high burlesque, with the mowers’ humble labor elevated to biblical proportions. The scene takes an unsettling turn, however, when one of the mowers accidentally kills a low-nesting rail. He recoils at the violence he has done to the bird, fearing what its untimely, grisly death portends. No sooner does his shock settle into dread than he is upstaged by Thestylis, the nymph who serves up the bird as part of a providential feast and, in doing so, seems to reinforce the biblical arch-narrative introduced by the speaker:

But bloody Thestylis, that waits
To bring the mowing camp their cates,
Greedy as kites, has trussed it up,
And forthwith means on it to sup:
When on another quick she lights,
And cries, ‘He called us Israelites;
But now, to make his saying true,
Rails rain for quails, for manna, dew.’ (51.401-8)

The stanza begins with the problematic designation of Thestylis as “bloody,” the same adjective used in the prior stanza to describe the blade of the scythe that killed the rail. Has that same blood magically transferred to her person? Is she physically stained with the blood of the bird that was unknowingly “carved” by the mower, or rather is she bloody-minded in her rush to read the accident as divine providence? The viewer is not only blindsided by the unaccountably gory visage of a figure habitually associated with hay-ropes and herbs, but then left to wonder how she has so swiftly “trussed up” the bird that was slain in the grass moments ago. One setting has simply morphed into the next, and not quite in the manner of the “engines strange” that power the masque. The meadow does not so much approximate as accelerate the rapid scene-changing effects produced by turning devices and tractable scenes.

Amid the kinetic excess, the speaker loses the perspectival privilege he has enjoyed as an observer of events. Thestylis lays bare the poem's artifice through direct reference to the speaker, whose Exodus allusion she completes in grotesque fashion by comparing the appearance of a second rail to God's provision of manna and quail. Presumably the rail is the presence she detects in line 405 ("on another quick she lights"), but the wording also refers obliquely to the speaker, thrust from anonymity by the luminous glance of the maiden. The scene before him remains the same, but in a metatheatrical turn, the focus expands such that he finds himself implicated in the carnage. Thenceforward he must answer for his bloody creation: in stanza fifty-two he grieves the fate of the "unhappy birds," effectively countering the providential narrative that has grown out of his initial comparison of the mowers to the Israelites. In having the speaker silence his own creation, Marvell points up the agency and complicity built into the spectatorial gaze.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the speaker's lament is rudely eclipsed by the mowers' antimasque, an even more flamboyant show of destruction:

Or sooner hatch or higher build:
 The mower now commands the field;
 In whose new traverse seemeth wrought
 A camp of battle newly fought:
 Where, as the meads with hay, the plain
 Lies quilted o'er with bodies slain:
 The women that with forks it fling,
 Do represent the pillaging. (53.417-24)

The miniature tragedy of the slaughtered rail pales beside the massacre that appears here. The mower (not the speaker) now commands the field, and it is his vision that is projected onto the "new traverse," or stage curtain, that marks the change of scene. The traverse bears the image of a battlefield strewn with dead bodies, an image that theoretically may be focalized into the more palatable sight of a freshly harvested hayfield. However, the scene as presented precludes such a synthesis. As Marcus has argued, the reversal of vehicle and tenor in this stanza, in which the war metaphor used to represent the hay harvest transforms into a harvest metaphor representing war, makes "the iconography of this 'new Traverse' ... remarkably difficult to read."⁴⁶ The parts of the metaphor never coalesce into a whole, as exemplified by the field women manneristically "representing" rather than *doing* the pillaging. As in the example of Thestylis outing the speaker, the stanza evokes the metamorphic features of the

⁴⁶ Marcus, *Politics of Mirth*, 250.

masque: yet again, it is not an actual scene change but rather the indeterminate motion occurring within the scene that defamiliarizes the image. The speaker may strain to discern the object behind the image, to locate stasis amid the motion, but the meadow and its denizens persist in shifting shape.

Collectively, the prolific optical play of the meadow comprises a heightened iteration of masque theatrics, where the speaker's experience is similar to that of the sensorily inclined Hobbesian multitude. As the setting shifts to the wood, however, the poem delves more deeply into the ethics of spectatorship and, in the process, gestures toward a more complexly participatory theatricality. The visual tricks remain, but the question of the speaker's consent to be deceived by them looms anew as he drifts towards the center of the action; soon he will absorb the chance hit of the masque and become a full-fledged player. Ironically, the wood is introduced as a sanctuary from the meadow, which is overrun by floodwaters from the nearby Denton estate:

Then, to conclude these pleasant acts,
Denton sets ope its cataracts;
And makes the meadow truly be
(What it but seemed before) a sea. (59.465-68)

The flood itself is presented as a theatrical device, the *deus ex machina* that resolves the illusions of the prior "pleasant acts" and propels the meadow to its aquatic destiny: "eels now bellow in the ox" (60.474), "boats can over bridges sail" (60.477), and "fishes do the stables scale" (60.478). Significantly, these amphibious mutations are ontological, not optical, in nature. The flood "makes the meadow *truly be*," and the speaker halts to explain images that, while plainly fantastical and grotesque, are not produced by ocular sleight of hand: "Let others tell the paradox" (60.473). Consequently, when he leaves the flooded meadow and girds himself Noah-like in the primordial wood of the Appleton forest, the move does not represent a rejection of visual artifice or an embrace of essentialist ontology. On the contrary, it signifies the speaker's further incorporation into the theatrical fiction, whereby he explores not just the visual but also the intellectual, corporeal, and affective dimensions of immersive spectatorship. From the outside the forest suggests an impenetrable abyss—"Dark all without it knits" (64.505)—but within "It opens passable and thin; / And in as loose an order grows, / As the Corinthian porticoes" (64.506-8).

The covert theatricality of the wood represents perhaps the grandest illusion of all in *Upon Appleton House*, a nod to the surreptitious activity that carried on behind and beyond theaters' shuttered doors. Where once the speaker observed he now participates: sampling the musics of the wood (stanzas sixty-five and sixty-six);

conferring with the birds and trees (stanza seventy-one); dabbling in the hermetic mystical arts (stanza seventy-three); basking in the sumptuousness of the grove (stanzas seventy-five to seventy-eight); and fishing on the banks of the River Wharfe (stanza eighty-one). He enjoys unprecedented performative license in the theater of the wood, weaving in and out of personas at a rate that, as Robert Cummings has noted, suggests “the bewilderment of a man whose own conceptions take him by surprise” and sets off the “relative fixity” of the rest of the poem.⁴⁷ The speaker’s radical permeability to his surroundings, which encompasses visual as well as auditory and tactile stimuli, at once comprises a fuller articulation of the theatrical sensorium and a realization of its most feared proclivities. Marvell’s description of the wood seems calculated to stoke anxieties about the amorphousness of the self, a commonplace of antitheatrical discourse in the early modern period. For instance, in *Plays Confuted in Five Actions* (1582), Stephen Gosson decries theater’s excessive appeals to carnal delight, which “hindreth the course of reason” and “whets vs to wantonnes” in a variety of ways:

[I]t withdraweth the minde from better studies, the minde like a stringe, being let downe, and pitcht, beneath his naturall compasse, to this key of carnall delight. ... it breedeth a hunger, & thirst, after pleasure. For when the thing which our appetite enioyeth cannot bee receued all at once, but by succession, or change, we gape after more, as hee that hearing one halfe of a sentence, & delighteth in that, is very desirous to haue the rest. So in Comedies delight being moued with varietie of shewes, of euent, of musicke, the longer we gaze, the more we craue, yea so forcible they are, that afterwards being but thought vpon, they make vs seeke for the like an other time.⁴⁸

The wood scenes in *Upon Appleton House* bear out Gosson’s dire warnings with near-comic precision. In stanza seventy-four the speaker is literally jostled from his studies by the impromptu masque of nature that swells about him. From that point on, the resplendent variety of the wood spurs him to flights of sensual leisure, turning the once measured observer of events into the inveterate pleasure-seeker. “Languishing with ease” on “pallets swoll’n of velvet moss” (75.593–94), he gives thanks for the respite from reason he has been indulged:

⁴⁷ Robert Cummings, “The Forest Sequence in *Upon Appleton House*: The Imaginative Contexts of a Poetic Episode,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (1984): 179.

⁴⁸ Stephen Gosson, *Playes confuted in five actions prouing that they are not to be suffred in a Christian common weale, by the waye both the cauils of Thomas Lodge, and the play of playes, written in their defence, and other obiections of players frendes, are truly set downe and directlye aunswared* (London, 1582), sig. F5v–F6r.

Thanks for my rest ye mossy banks,
 And unto you cool zephyrs thanks,
 Who, as my hair, my thoughts too shed,
 And winnow from the chaff my head. (75.597-600)

As the speaker gives himself over to his idyllic surroundings, his passivity evolves into a studied anti-agency. His rapid habituation to pleasure takes the form of a performative masochism, as he calls variously to be bound, chained, nailed, and staked down by the verdant vegetation about him; the longer he gazes, the more he craves. Only the unexpected sighting of Mary Fairfax snaps him from his reverie and prompts him to renounce “pleasures slight”: “’Twere shame that such judicious eyes / Should with such toys a man surprise” (82.652-54). Shame, not spectacle, is the operative force in this formulation of theatricality. It delineates the boundaries within which the speaker consents to be transported beyond himself. In the secluded theater of the grove, he claims immunity to external suggestion: “How safe, methinks, and strong, behind / These trees have I encamped my mind” (76.601-2). After trying on a series of boldly luxuriant poses, he is chastened into an equally poignant self-awareness by Mary’s “judicious eyes,” which compel him to cease his narcissistic histrionics and rejoin the ranks of spectators. Like “loose Nature” (83.657) around him, he summarily gathers himself and gazes in awed admiration at the young heiress.

If the speaker’s dalliances as “prelate of the grove” seem the product of the antitheatrical imagination, the shift to Mary as the poem’s focal point serves as a reminder of the instructive, moralistic, and authoritarian functionalities of the stage. Nature and its constituents, like the imagined patrons of a reformed theater, are at once awed and ennobled by what they behold. Mary’s benign influence is compared to that of the “modest halcyon” calming the seas:

The viscous air, wheres’e’er she fly,
 Follows and sucks her azure dye;
 The jellying stream compacts below,
 If it might fix her shadow so;
 The stupid fishes hang, as plain
 As flies in crystal overta’en;
 And men with silent scene assist,
 Charmed with the sapphire-wingèd mist. (85.673-80)

Ultimately Mary's potency exceeds that of the halcyon. Nature is quieted under the bird's fabled influence, whereas under hers it is transformed: "But by her flames, in heaven tried, / Nature is wholly vitrified" (86.687-88). Following the sumptuous dissolution of the wood scenes, the trope of vitrified nature and its connotations of apocalypse suggest a hard course correction, a sweeping containment of theater's subversive potential. Other than her judicious eyes, Mary is not described; her presence commands wonder, but not through formal display. The spectacle of Mary, such as it is, derives from the choreographed image of nature falling in line before her—that is, from the audience, now figured as masquers feting their guest of honor by imaging her virtue. The halcyon's impact is manifest in the "viscous air," "jellying stream," and "stupid fishes": but in line 679, with the appearance of the men who "with silent scene assist," Marvell reveals that the stilling act is a creation of theatrical optics. David Carroll Simon likens the effect to a "semi-conscious masque" marked by a "torsion of perspective that blurs the edges of things while making them available for inspection,"⁴⁹ while Nigel Mapp reads it as "theatre without the show ... something like a phenomenology of fugitive colour."⁵⁰ As the details of Mary's influence are shaded in, the initial promise of a chastened retreat from theatricality fades into an exploration of theater's visual economy. The river congeals to allow the formation of a fixed shadow upon its surface, emblazoning the halcyon's presence while preserving her elusiveness. The fish in the river are subject to the reverse effect: they gain visibility and lose mystique, like flies trapped in crystal. Finally, the stagehands are "charmed with the sapphire-wingèd mist" that remains from the azure-infused "viscous air" described at the start of the stanza; they are moved by the scene they have a hand in creating, literally breathing it in.

The heady stillness that settles over nature is, in some sense, analogous to the "abject admiration" that features in Davenant's model of a morally instructive, socially palliative theater. Just as he believes in the power of sensory impressions to compel obedience and emulation, Marvell presents the sighting of Mary as the catalyst for nature to conform in lockstep to her example:

'Tis she that to these gardens gave
That wondrous beauty which they have;
She straightness on the woods bestows;

⁴⁹ David Carroll Simon, "Andrew Marvell and the Epistemology of Carelessness," *ELH* 82, no. 2 (2015): 577.

⁵⁰ Nigel Mapp, "The Obliteration of Vision: Marvell and the Authority of Nature and the Senses," in *Authority of Expression in Early Modern England*, ed. Nely Keinänen and Maria Salenius (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2009), 39.

To her the meadow sweetness owes;
 Nothing could make the river be
 So crystal-pure but only she;
 She yet more pure, sweet, straight, and fair,
 Than gardens, woods, meads, rivers are. (87.689-96)

The suddenly immaculate landscape of Nun Appleton jars with the sprawling fantasia that the speaker lately fashioned from the same environs. As in the conquest and dispossession of the priory, the cleansing of nature turns on triumphant chastity and spectacular metamorphosis, stock masque tropes—only in this case, the casualty is the speaker, and the transformation is gradual, not instant. When Mary appears, the speaker is decentered from the action to the point of near invisibility. He reclaims something of the spectatorial privilege he had held before passing to the abyss of the meadow, sizing up the entirety of the landscape in a single, widescreen gaze and bending it to his imaginative will. However, the shame he feels on her arrival is not resolved. Rather, it is displaced onto nature, which he strives to remake in the image of chastity, even after it has been “wholly vitrified” by Mary’s heaven-tried flames. He instructs nature to shelter the innocent pupil “till Fate her worthily translates, / And find a Fairfax for our Thwaites” (94.747-48), signaling the dynastic hopes that the Fairfaxes had for their only child:

Employ the means you have by her,
 And in your kind yourselves prefer;
 That, as all virgins she precedes,
 So you all woods, streams, gardens, meads. (94.749-52)

The prospect of nature reasserting its primordial excellence solidifies Nun Appleton’s distinction from the world outside of it, which is “not, what once it was. ... But a rude heap together hurled” (96.761-62). After indefinite digressions and illusions, the estate coalesces into an orderly space that mirrors the values of its owner: principled retirement, lineal regeneration, and spiritual and intellectual nurture. However, the speaker’s experience there has been more problematic than this outcome would imply. His move to impose strict order upon a space that he happily disordered—and was happily disordered by—is categorically reactive. In turn, the blanket assertion of Fairfacian values seems an attempt at diversion, the work of a gazed-upon object who wants quickly to be unseen. Nun Appleton emerges at last as a theater of moral instruction, but for him it has served chiefly to force a reckoning with the amorality of lived sensory experience.

In the end, this duality is emblematic of Marvell's mode of engagement with theater in *Upon Appleton House*. On the one hand, the poem recalls the reformist vision of a state-sanctioned theater that spurs its patrons to renounce vice and emulate virtue. On the other, it anatomizes the spectatorial abjection generated beneath these institutional auspices, hence revealing a more complicated, more expansive dynamic of theatrical stimulus and response. Marvell's purposeful incorporation of masque theatrics into the poem dramatizes the unsettledness of the historical moment—a moment that, for him, is inflected by the particularities of his patronage relationship and his position in the Fairfax household. More provocatively, Marvell's use of the masque suggests that the moment is constitutively theatrical, that the material and discursive structures of theater are not incidental to but rather embedded in the history, topography, and sensibility of Nun Appleton. These structures are evoked in the poem's final stanza, which cuts from the styling of the estate as "heaven's centre, Nature's lap. / And Paradise's only map" (96.767-68) to the cryptic scene of "salmon-fishers moist" (97.769) who wear their canoes on their heads "like Antipodes in shoes" (97.771). Such contrary images were customary in the thick of the wood, where the speaker fancied himself "an inverted tree" (71.568): but here, following the diligent re-creation of Nun Appleton in Eden's likeness, they are unexpected. Even Mary's propitious influence cannot neutralize the foreboding strangeness of the place, which finally prompts the speaker to retire indoors: "Let's in: for the dark hemisphere / Does now like one of them appear" (97.775-76). The closing couplet suggests a soft validation of Fairfax's retreat from public life, as it grants the threat from the outside, but the house has long since been exposed as a compromised refuge.

While there is irony to the courtliest of stage genres being deployed to capture the troubled state of the post-regicide Commonwealth, the poem fundamentally stresses continuity, not breakage, with the masque tradition and its conventions. This can be explained, in general terms, by the persistence and pervasiveness of theatricality; the rhetorical framing devices of theater were endemic in the written word in seventeenth-century England, across generic and ideological lines.⁵¹ But Marvell's engagement runs deeper than that: *Upon Appleton House* probes the moral, intellectual, and aesthetic dimensions of theatrical representation. His poem treats the operative dynamics of the masque—stillness and motion, perspective and sensibility, spectatorship and performance—in ways that bear the distinct influence of the theater debate and adjacent fields of inquiry. As such, it presages the modest but deeply influential reform and revival movement of the mid-to-late 1650s, a movement that, like the poem,

⁵¹ For an instructive overview of seventeenth-century theatrical rhetoric, see Brendan Prawdzyk, *Theatrical Milton: Politics and Poetics of the Staged Body* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 1-13.

proceeds by way of artful negotiations with the English masque tradition. The poem's gaze is neither forward nor backward, its sights trained neither on reform nor reaction. It imagines theatricality from the inside out, from the perspective of a subject who by "chance's better wit" experiences the immersiveness of theater at a time when the institution itself lacks a constant referent. If dramatic performance survived prohibition by migrating to alternate spaces and assuming different forms, *Upon Appleton House* reminds us that such maneuvers, themselves acts of motion and metamorphosis, are inexorably theatrical. At Marvell's *Nun Appleton*, the conditions least hospitable to the enterprise of theater are instrumental to the art.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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