

“This Country of England, Once as Uncivil as Ireland Now Is:” Sir Thomas Smith, Hill Hall, and the Fashioning of English Identity

I’d like to thank the organizers of this year’s conference for the invitation to be here with you today. As the name of our session suggests, the “Southeast” I will discuss is Southeast England, Essex, to be exact, where within the parish of Theydon Mount stands the enigmatic Hill Hall [figure 2], a manor-house built, rebuilt, then rebuilt again, by the scholar, courtier, colonizer, and sometimes architect, Sir Thomas Smith [figure 3]. While less celebrated than contemporaries like William Cecil or Francis Bacon, Smith’s influence rivaled either man’s, a feat made all the more remarkable by the fact that, unlike Cecil or Bacon, Smith was born into that peasant class who could hope for little more than subsistence. Little is known concerning how Smith emerged from his inauspicious origins to make his way to Cambridge University, where a scholarship from the Crown made it possible for him to enroll. After gaining his degree, Smith stayed on as professor, lecturing on natural philosophy, Greek, and Greek philosophy. In 1540, he was appointed the first Regius Chair of Civil Law, and in 1543 Vice-Chancellor of the university. In 1547, Smith transitioned from the academy to the court—serving as Secretary of State, a member of Parliament and the Privy Council, and twice as Elizabeth I’s ambassador to France. In addition to these pursuits, he was a prolific author, publishing on the reform of English spelling and pronunciation, the English commonwealth and its “mixed” constitution, and the desirability of English colonies, a project he personally carried out when, near the end of his life, he established an English colony in Ireland.

Despite his many achievements, Smith was often a man out of place—a commoner in the halls of power, upwardly mobile within a society of fixed roles, cosmopolitan in a time of increasing national insularity. Although generally favored by the Crown, he was perpetually in danger of being revealed for the commoner he was. Even while serving as Elizabeth’s

ambassador to France, Smith was taunted by English nobles for “having come to the Court but yesterday a beggarly scholar.” In what follows, I would like to examine the ways in which Smith’s building and rebuilding served as a medium for the fashioning of his ever-precarious, and therefore ever-evolving, identity. Manor houses, or “seats” as they were more often referred to, were not just homes, but emblems of lineage and authority—identifying their owners as autonomous social, political, economic, and even juridical actors. It is not surprising, then, that Smith sought to procure for himself this symbol of rank and status. Having acquired an existing property in 1554, he set about replacing the haphazard collection of buildings which preceded him with a house organized on a courtyard plan and ornamented in the Tudor Gothic style common to the period.

Having secured this seat, one might imagine Smith retired to the life of a country gentleman. Yet, only a decade after the completion of this first Hill Hall, Smith undertook a second campaign to rebuild its North and West wings “stronger and more splendidly,” as he wrote. The intervening decade seems to have altered Smith’s architectural taste considerably for rather than continue in his earlier mode, [figure 4] Smith now incorporated classical elements present neither in his earlier design, nor, indeed, in almost any English house of Smith’s day. The pointed arch which defined the main entry was now framed by Doric columns. The timber-framed interior was covered over with murals depicting scenes from classical mythology. A pediment was added to the courtyard, whose West façade was overlaid with a classical arcade featuring a Doric ground floor and Ionic first floor culminating in Corinthian aedicula surrounding otherwise traditional dormer windows.

[figure 5] Five years later, in a third and final building campaign, Smith turned his attention to the South and East wings, moving Hill Hall still further towards a classicism rare

enough to have caused Nikolaus Pevsner to question whether it could possibly be Elizabethan. A giant order was now added to the exterior elevations. In the courtyard, the aforementioned arcade was extended with a symmetry and regularity it had not previously possessed. On the South courtyard elevation, round arches replaced their pointed predecessors. **[figure 6, comparison of South and West courtyard elevations]**

Hill Hall's originally Tudor Gothic mode was thus rather urgently and unprecedentedly classicized. In his excavation of the site, archaeologist Paul Drury found that, while the first Hill Hall "seems not to have included any significant classical details," Smith's later reconstructions "virtually eliminated Gothic details." According to Drury, this change was as complete as it was sudden. "There is virtually nothing in what we know of Smith's first Hill Hall," he argues, to suggest the "...full-blooded classical dressing of the exterior that was to follow." And yet, if Smith's Tudor Gothic mode offered no hint of the classicism to come, that classicism carried with it more than a vestige of its predecessor. As Drury's own drawings illustrate, even at the conclusion of Smith's third and final campaign, gothic elements existed alongside their classical counterparts in tension, if not opposition. The riddle of Hill Hall is thus less the replacement of one style with another, than why Smith thought it necessary to retain certain recognizably conventional motifs even as he pursued an *all'antica* manner with little precedent in England.

The aforementioned litany of personas Smith assumed over the course of his long life, and especially his years in France, suggest sources for his stylistic ambivalence. Not only did Smith begin the first of his reconstructions immediately after returning from France, but it was in France that he most likely procured the six copies-of and commentaries-upon Vitruvius found in his library, along with Philibert de'Lorme's *Nouvelles Inventions pour Bien Bastir*, and Hans Blum's *Quinque Columnarum*, from which Smith took his column capitals. France is also the

likely source of the giant order whose Elizabethan origins would have shocked Pevsner. As a source for that order, Drury has suggested Sebastiano Serlio's seventh book, where Plate XVII [figure 7] shows a country villa not unlike Smith's Hill Hall, a giant order ornamenting its entry facade. "While the resemblance to Hill Hall is striking," Drury notes, "...there can be no direct connection, since [Serlio's] work was not published until 1575," that is, not published until after the order's appearance on Hill Hall's South and East elevations. While there cannot have been a direct connection between Smith and Serlio, an indirect connection existed in the person of Ippolito II d'Este, the Cardinal of Ferrara, who was closely associated, at different points in his life, with both Serlio and Smith. As Serlio's former patron, Il d'Este had knowledge and potentially even manuscript copies of Serlio's seventh book. If so, this would help us account not only for Hill Hall's giant order, but the broader conceptual underpinnings of Smith's project. In Book VII, for instance, Serlio not only provided designs for country villas, but suggestions for ornamenting existing houses in the "*costume d'Italia*," as he wrote, and even more to the point, advice on how one might "reform" existing facades using antique elements. [figure 8] Plate LXII, for instance, shows an informally organized Gothic elevation "reformed" by the regulating and regularizing principles of the new classicism.

[figure 9] While the subject matter of Smith's consultations with the Cardinal can only be surmised, it is not surprising that he sought Il d'Este's council. The Cardinal's reputation proceeded him. In his 1528 *Il Cortegiano*, or *Book of the Courtier*, Baldassare Castiglione had declared Il d'Este the ideal practitioner of the kind of courtiership Smith had embarked upon when he left the academy for the court. What Castiglione refers to as Il d'Este's "supreme grace" was, as Castiglione makes clear, a birthright. The problem taken up in the *Book of the Courtier* was how those less fortunate than Il d'Este, those, for instance like Smith, who were lowborn but

gifted, might attain some degree of artful, or artificial, grace as a means of winning their prince's favor. At stake then was the degree to which those of Smith's aspirational class might transform what we today might call their cultural capital into a form of power capable of securing those benefits traditionally reserved for heredity and lineage. If, in adopting his *all'antica* manner, Smith demonstrated the kind of learning and cultural sophistication that won him the favor of those who wielded power by birth, he was also obliged to perform that studied nonchalance Castiglione advocated—asserting his knowledge of continental innovations even as he paid homage to English tradition.

That the years in which Smith “dressed” Hill Hall in the guise of classical Rome (1568-75) were the same years he spent planning and implementing his aforementioned Irish colony (1565-75) suggests house and colony, classicism and colonization, were linked in his mind. Not only were both novel enterprises, both were explicit revivals of Roman practice. D. B. Quinn has argued “what is clearest about Smith's views on colonization is that they were strongly influenced by classical precedent.” “Indeed,” Quinn goes on to say, “it might be argued that it was [Smith's] knowledge of...Roman history which most strongly turned his attention to the possibility of developing new English settlements on Irish land.” As his many statements on the topic demonstrate, Smith viewed English civility, and even England itself, as a product of Rome's civilizing influence. [figure 10] “I do understand by histories of things by past,” Smith wrote the Crown's representatives in Ireland, “how this country of England, once as uncivil as Ireland now is, was by colonies of the Romans brought to understand the laws and orders whereof there hath no nation more straightly and truly kept the mold even to this day then we, yea more than the Italians and Romans themselves.” As Rome had “molded” uncivil Britons into civilized Englishmen, so too would the English convert the Irish from, as Smith put it, “a rude,

uncivil, and barbarous to a civil people.” And, of course, it was Roman architecture which, by way of the Renaissance, Smith used to move Hill Hall from what he must have considered at least a less civil to a more civil condition.

[Although, the notion of having been created in, and then subsequently kept the Roman mold, even more so than the Italians themselves, suggests Smith’s classicism was a return to a native Romanness within Englishness itself.]

This collapse of past and present, analogy and reality, evidences a desire on Smith’s part not only to learn-from but to enact Rome’s example. Early-moderns have often been accused of lacking that sense of anachronism by which later periods saw the past *as past*. In this at least, Smith was of his time. In England’s colonial past Smith found a script consisting of roles to be played and actions to be performed—a “theater of empire,” as John Speed would later write.

The literalness with which this performative conception of identity played itself out at Hill Hall can be glimpsed in a footnote, written by Smith’s friend and former student Gabriel Harvey, fittingly recorded in Harvey’s copy of Livy’s *History of Rome*. Here Harvey recounts an audience at Hill Hall, wherein Smith and his guests debated the relative merits of Fabius and Marcellus—two Roman generals who battled Hannibal. Invoking just the kind of conversational salon imagined in *The Book of the Courtier*, Harvey relates how:

Thomas Smith junior and Sir Humphrey Gilbert [debated] for Marcellus, Thomas Smith senior and Doctor Walter Haddon for Fabius Maximus...At length the son and Sir Humphrey yielded to the distinguished Secretary: I am not sure that Marcellus yielded to Fabius.

A literal performance, then, with Hill Hall as scene and Englishmen simultaneously playing the roles of Italian courtiers and Roman generals. The proximity here of “real” and “fictive,” “historical” and “contemporary” personas suggests something beyond mere play-acting. At the time of the debate, Smith had only recently undertaken the second of his

classicizing reconstructions, he and his son were finalizing plans for their Irish colony, and their interlocuter, Sir Humphrey Gilbert, had just returned from Ireland after leading a notoriously brutal campaign under Sidney.

If the *all'antica* manner provided a plausible setting for such play-acting, its association with Italy, Catholicism, and even paganism, presented a threat, the severity of which is suggested by the many plots during this period to replace Elizabeth with the Catholic Mary, Queen of Scots. In 1570, as Smith began his second reconstruction, Pope Pius V excommunicated Elizabeth, symbolically deposing her from the throne and releasing English Catholics from their allegiance to her. Patrick Collinson argues that throughout this period, anti-Catholicism served as “a sheet anchor of English nationhood.” Keith Wrightson reiterates the point, arguing that during these years “the Catholic community [in England]...lay under the shadow of distrust and was subject to a developing prejudice which would take centuries to dispel.”

Paradoxically then, while Englishmen like Smith increasingly fashioned themselves in the new modes of civility emanating from predominantly Catholic centers, they simultaneously asserted their “rude” Englishness. This distinction between “rude” and “refined” style was not only on display in architectural treatises like Serlio’s, and manuals of courtly behavior like Castiglione’s, but in those Protestant publications which characterized the difference between Protestant and Catholic religion as the difference between austere truth and sensuous allure. Although Smith was, by any measure, one of the most well-connected, well-educated, and well-traveled men of his day, he nevertheless spoke of himself as “rude and homely...a plain blunt man, unused to Court compliments, smooth words, and refined manners.” “At compliments,” he wrote Cecil, “I am the veriest calf and beast in the world.” One of few compliments Smith ever paid his son was to commend him for being like his father in two respects: truth and rudeness.

It seems that, if they were not to become subject to the same critiques John Foxe and other militant Protestants had levied against the “Papists,” Smith’s classicizing tendencies would require an equally prominent display of that rude simplicity supposed to characterize Protestant religion and even Englishness itself. This balance—or balancing *act*, as it so often became—was a precarious one. Men like Smith were obliged to play all sides of the issue, retaining something of their supposed rude simplicity in their pursual of the new modes of cultural sophistication—a dissemblance, which, as we have seen, was itself required of the ideal courtier.

And so, even as Smith moved Hill Hall towards an unprecedented classicism, he was nevertheless careful to retain the aforementioned customary features of English domesticity. While such tensions have often been accounted for by reference to the supposed *naïveté* of English builders, we might also recognize in them something of the balancing act of self-fashioning. The juxtaposition of a native, unlettered, informal style and a foreign, codified, restrictive style served the period as a proxy for distinctions of class and rank. Whereas England’s nobility were by-and-large still housed in those medieval strongholds whose defensive intent was rendered increasingly superfluous by the Tudor consolidation of power, Smith’s upstart class of intellectual laborers patronized the new forms of classicism made known to them by learning and travel. In defense of his aristocratic patrons, Ben Jonson, for instance, opposed the unassuming dignity of England’s traditional architecture to the studied pomposity of the new classicism. Writing of the Sidneys’ ancestral home in his poem “To Penshurst,” Jonson wrote:

Thou art not, Penshurst, built to envious show of touch [touchstone] or marble;
nor canst boast a row of polished pillars...
but stand’st an ancient pile, and these grudged at, art revered the while...
they that will proportion thee
With other edifices, when they see
Those proud, ambitious heaps, and nothing else,
May say, their lords have built, but thy lord dwells.

For Smith, this stylistic tension was perhaps less a battle *between* traditions than the playing of one tradition against another. Indeed, Hill Hall’s most traditionally “English” feature, the “Hall” of Hill Hall, was no less a revival than its giant order. For those, like Smith, who desired the new classical formalities, the traditional separation of the hall’s circulatory and spatial axes presented a dilemma. **[figure 11]** As early as 1538, Hengrave Hall provided an initial solution by placing its hall opposite a courtyard entrance, linking the primary interior to the primary exterior space by sacrificing the symmetry of both hall entrance and courtyard elevation. At Kirby Hall, while the hall is approached on an axis that runs through the entry elevation and out towards an entrance gate, passage and hall remain oriented ninety-degrees to one another, as was the case with other notable houses of this period.

[figure 12] Like Hengrave and Kirby, Smith located his hall opposite the North courtyard entry, behind the most purely classical of its courtyard elevations. Like Kirby, one enters this elevation on center, through the central bay of an asymmetrically situated five-bay elevation. Whereas Kirby’s central entry leads directly to its hall-passage, at Hill Hall access was mediated by a loggia. Having entered the South elevation, one turned right, then left to enter the hall-passage, then left again to enter the hall itself—a mix of orientation and re-orientation that followed neither classical nor English models. What is interesting is that Smith sacrificed the clarity not only of English precedents, but of his own previous designs. The original Hill Hall, for instance, adopted the model Kirby would later take up, de-centering the hall in order to align the hall-passage to the elevation. Smith’s final design refused this compromise. His hall would be entered both in the traditional manner, that is, at its edge, and according to the dictates of the new style, that is, at its center through the symmetrical courtyard elevation. **[figure 13]** Even here, in the seemingly most classical of Hill Hall’s elevations, we find the interplay of native and

foreign style, as the hall’s “dais—” a raised platform where family members took their meals, and where, most likely, Smith and his interlocuters performed as Roman generals—literally and figuratively decenters those classical elements meant to “dress” the hall in the guise of antiquity.

The most purely classical of Hill Hall’s elevations and the most purely English of its spaces, reside one within the other, relations unresolved, the English residing within the classical—enveloped yet distinct. If these were two aspects of the performance that was Smith, they also stand as two scenes of his civility—the rude Englishman in classical dress. If Hill Hall’s divergent stylistic modes displayed and even performed, along with Smith, the new modes of civility, they also revealed, and continue to reveal, something of the performative, internally-divided, nature of all identity, be it personal, national, religious, or stylistic.

Thank you.