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Sir Francis Bacon: Progressing into the Future

*Introduction*

For England, the early seventeenth century faced changing politics, new invention and concepts, and a world of different possibilities. With the death of Queen Elizabeth I and the beginning of James I’s reign, England’s commonwealth kept the strength of England alive. Among the people to establish themselves and further England (and more specifically English Literature), Sir Francis Bacon became a prominent figure. Sir Francis Bacon, philosopher and theorist, developed a strong foundation to the genre of essay writing, which literature never saw before. Although scholars no longer analyze his work within his field of sciences, his work remains a fantastic example of literature that continues to possess literary worth.

*Biography of Sir Francis Bacon*

Sir Francis Bacon (1561 – 1626), using a new style of essay writing, became a great figure to history, politics, science, and literature around the beginning of the seventeenth century (Greenblatt 1662). Having come from a higher-class family, Bacon easily found his way into law (1662). He entered Parliament towards the end of Elizabeth I’s reign as attorney general, and under James I’s reign he gained much importance as lord chancellor (Greenblatt 1357). “He was knighted in 1603, became attorney general in 1613, lord chancellor… and Baron Verulam in 1618, and Viscount St. Albans in 1621” (1662). The fame would not always continue; “In the same year [1621], … he was convicted on twenty-three accounts of corruption and accepting bribes, and was fined, imprisoned, and forced from office” (1662). He confessed to all the accounts (1662), but after everything settled down, society seemed to still value and accept him, even though he lost his position in Parliament.

Due to his treaty writing and study in law, he became a worthy writer and politician (1662). With this in mind, Bacon decided to write essays that brought forth his new and progressive philosophies for his time. Bacon’s concepts competed with a French man, Michel de Montaigne, “who proposed to learn… by intensive analysis of his own sensations, emotions, attitudes, and ideas” (1662). Montaigne wrote in a, “reflective style; intimate… and affable in tone, and speaks constantly in the first person” (1662). Bacon wrote concisely and in an “often disjunctive style, as well as a tone of cool objectivity and weighty sententiousness; he seldom uses ‘I’” (1662). Instead, he focuses more so on the theory directly.

His views also conflicted with other scientists and philosophers like Whereas Donne and Aristotle. “Donne saw human history as a process of inevitable degeneration and decay” (1662). Bacon opposed, claiming history’s direction as quite the opposite to Donne’s and “saw it as progressive,” and he believed he would be the one to advance everyone forward to a stronger future using his new methods and ideology (1662). In his essay, *Novum Organum*, originally written in Latin, Bacon put forth the idea of induction, which to him meant, “combining empirical investigation with carefully limited and tested generalizations” (1662). He thought this to be the “right method to investigating nature,” and, to his benefit, the ideas he presents still influence the philosophy to our current scientific method (1662). He wrote this in Latin specifically “for an international scholarly audience,” so he could further spread his goal to make this philosophy well-known and established (1677). This argued against Aristotle’s *Organon*, which still maintains “the basis of university education, with its heavy reliance on deduction” (1662).

As a whole, Bacon used his essays and rhetoric to “urge a new faith in experiment and science” (1663). “He segregated theology and science as ‘two truths,’ freeing science to go its own way” (1663). In doing this, Bacon started what he wished to accomplish: an advancement in science as a distinct and stand-alone entity from the church to progress humankind. As an essayist and author, he influenced literature into a new path of thinking in the field of rhetoric and writing.

*2. Historical and Political Climate of the Early Seventeenth Century*

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, Queen Elizabeth I died leaving no heir to the throne. Her relative, James Stuart (VI in Scotland), took over, making him James I in England. This change seemed neither fantastic nor brutal. Elizabeth ruled with a “‘mixed’ government, in which power was shared by the monarch, the House of Lords, and the House of Commons” (1342). King James did not find this way of ruling suitable for his reign. James believed “kings… derived their powers from God rather than from the people” (1342). Hence, he ruled using, what Thomas Howard states as, “subject’s fear and subjection” rather than Elizabeth, who ruled with “her subject’s love and good affection” (qtd. in 1342). Regardless, James’ rule created some tension, but nothing more of politics versus the people argument. Overall, he kept a decent rule with its ups and downs.

During James’ reign, the most significant issues dealt with finances caused by deeper unsettlements between the monarch and the subjects (1343). England was a wealthy, growing, and strong country when Elizabeth died. Elizabeth maintained a tight rule in which very few were knighted, which allowed for development in a country that was previously in hard times (1343-1344). James, in turn, knighted many people because he felt that was the regal thing to do, which cost the country money to do (1344). Not only this, but he had high expenses from having to “maintain not only his own household, but also separate establishments for his queen and for the heir” (1344). Along with his large amount of expenses, James also sustained a “disorderly and wasteful” court, ravished with a lot of drinking, feasting, and sport (1344). Due to his lack of listening to advice and council, James could not manage his spending and obtained a large amount of debt, which the inconvincible Parliament refused to bankroll by raising taxes (1344). This created tensions between James and the Parliament. Although this conflict appeared between the king and Parliament, and the “Crown’s deliberate attempts to manage the economy were often misguided, [King James and the Parliament’s] frequent inattention or refusal to interfere has the unintentional effect of stimulating effect of growth” (1344-1345).

Another entity that kept England afloat was the many sources of entrepreneurship during James’ time that focused itself on “industrial or agricultural improvement” (1345). These inventions and new concepts allowed for newfound attention to the “practical sciences, a faith in technology…, and a conviction that the future might be better than the past,” which conflicted with previous thought and rhetoric (1345, 1662). This built a new foundation for theorists and philosophers at the time, such as Francis Bacon (1345). The compilation of these aspects is credited for the economic salvation of England during James’ reign, but salvation of the economy was primarily due to “the initiative of individuals and small groups [rather] than to government policy, a factor that encouraged a reevaluation of the role of self-interest, the profit motive, and the role of business contracts in the betterment of the community” (1345).

Also, amidst James’ rule began a strong separation of Church between the Catholic High Church and the Puritan Low Church (Nov. 14 Class Notes). The Puritans, or the Low Church, in a basic sense, wanted a straightforward, one-and-only interpretation of the Bible, a church with nothing but white walls and pews, and no religious government (bishops, priests, etc.) (Nov. 14 Class Notes). The Catholics, or the High Church, wanted the Roman way of Catholicism with religious order and levels of power, decorative churches, and artful sermons that were up for interpretation (Nov. 14 Class Notes).

When Elizabeth ruled, the Church of England used the Elizabethan Book of Common Prayer, which has language that was “carefully chosen to be open to several interpretations and acceptable by both Protestant- and Catholic-learning subjects” (1345). The use of the Elizabethan Book of Common Prayer maintained most neutrality among Protestants and Catholics (1345). Since James started his reign, the separate church groups found the chance to influence the practices of the Church of England and the overall religious policy of England by coming to tell him the worries of the respective churches that appeared to him (1346). James chose to “restrain any single faction from controlling church policy” (1347). This caused James to keep a neutral stance on religion (class notes).

As a king, in general, “James was… often more successful when he was least [active]” throughout his reign (1345). Due to his personal interests and way of life, he often neglected to face issues, and Parliament really did not want to help, knowing he would take advantage as an authoritarian ruler. This caused the people of England to help themselves instead of relying on government or the king, which is why his reign neither troubled nor prospered England.

*3. Literary and Cultural Climate*

Major works and authors at this time were Jonson’s *Volpone*, John Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi*, and Shakespeare, who was at his height of his career with works like *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth* (1353).

Published in 1611, King James commissioned the translation of the Bible, which became one of the most recognized accomplishments during his rule (1347). Written in English, the Bible became easily accessible, which benefitted the Puritan’s way of handling church because they finally could teach the Bible in common vernacular and without a religious official (1347). At the same time, he translated some passages in ways that empowered the Catholic church hierarchy of power, which went against Puritans’ wishes “for a more confrontational policy toward Catholic powers” (1347). This version of the Bible and the religious conflicts and concerns developed into a source for author inspiration for literature for a long time.

As well, the conditions in the English commonwealth lived in, as stated in the previous section, flourished with new technology and concepts through invention and entrepreneurship. These aspects also inspired new literary works, theories, and techniques. These new philosophies and ideas started to lead England on a scientific route, which a religiously dominate England repressed in the past centuries. Sir Francis Bacon, a pioneer in this growing ideological field, separated “theology and science as ‘two truths,’” (1663), which allowed science to grow independently. This created a breakthrough for specific types of literature, such as essay writing.

The old ideology, a chain of being, which claimed nature possessed a rightful order, began to collapse around this era. For example, “God above angels, angels above humans, humans above animals, animals above plants, plants above rocks” (1349). This also applies to the British monarchy as well; the monarchy at the top above nobles, “nobles over the gentry, gentry over yeomen, yeomen over common laborers” (1349). Francis Bacon decided to test this conception of natural order. Testing, for him, required special methodology, instead of using deduction and reasoning, like past ways of learning. Instead, “he argued, groups of collaborators ought to design controlled experiments to find the truths of nature by empirical means” (1349). Francis Bacon, at this time, formed a version of the scientific method, which he believed would be the future of science (1662). His hope became a reality as his “revolutionary approach to the natural world profoundly impacted… people over the next several generations.” Some still use his philosophy and theory of experimentation today in different ways as the structure for the commonly used scientific method.

Also, at this time, printing became more common (1353). Authors desired to capture bigger numbers of readers, thus sending their work in to be printed soon after composition (1353). There still lingered the censorship laws King Henry VIII placed on printing, which lasted through the 1640s (1353). Since the London’s Stationer’s Company held a monopoly, controlled by the monarchy, this press reviewed and censored all ideological threats to the monarchy (1353). “[Any] authors, printers, and acting companies who flouted the censorship laws were subject to imprisonment, fines, or even bodily mutilation” (1354). To get around this, authors who wrote about dangerous topics using genres such as criticism or satire often wrote their message in fables using animals, stories about fanatical settings, or analyzing old historical events by applying current situations instead (1354).

*4. Original Reception and Criticism of Novum Organum*

When Bacon first spread his philosophies about natural sciences, Europe received Bacon and his literature greatly. According to Graham Rees, professor of English and drama at Queen Mary, University of London, many scientists, mathematicians, philosophers, and scholars found his work to be revolutionary (379-380). The earliest people recognizing his work were: French philosopher, scientist, and mathematician, Pierre Gassendi (1592-1655); French theologian, natural philosopher, and mathematician, Marin Mersenne (1588-1648); Dutch diplomat and poet, Constantijn Huygens (1596-1687); and Dutch philosopher, Isaac Beeckman (1588-1637), and many, many more (380).

Colin Maclaurin (1698-1746), a Scottish mathematician who developed and extended Sir Isaac Newton’s calculous, geometry, and gravitation (Britannica), highly recognized and honored Bacon. He believed “Bacon marked an important shift” in the field of philosophy and rhetoric (382). Maclaurin states, “Sir Francis Bacon… is justly held amongst the restorers of true learning, but more especially the founder of experimental philosophy. […] He proposed his plan… with so much strength of argument… as renders that admirable work the delight of all who have a taste for solid learning” (qtd. in Rees 382). From the early 1600s to the early 1800s, Bacon’s compositions remained highly regarded as influential and prominent in both rhetoric and literature.

In 1837, William Whewell challenged Bacon’s work by doing a philosophical study of the scientific method, the first since *Novum Organum* in 1620 (385; 1662). Along with Stuart Mill, these two had very mixed emotions towards Bacon’s philosophies (385). Others, like Sir David Brewster, a Scottish philosopher, believed that Bacon possessed great power and ranked him among some of the top scientists like Copernicus, Kepler, and so on (385). Therefore, towards the mid-1800s, scholars became somewhat skeptical of Bacon and his labors instead of an overall likeness.

Then, roughly twenty years after Whewell and Mill, G. H. Lewes further questioned Bacon and his essays (386):

Bacon was ‘the Father of Experimental Philosophy’ but was he ‘the first great Experimentalist? No. Was he the most successful experimentalist? No. Was he the discoverer of some of those great laws, the application of which is the occupation of succeeding generations—was he a Copernicus, a Galileo, a Kepler, a Torricelli, a Harvey, or a Newton? No. (qtd. in Rees 386).

This harsher criticism became a strong-sided belief about Bacon’s work towards the end of the nineteenth century. Of course, with any criticism, there were those who defended and still withheld Bacon’s work and ideas, like Karl Pearson, in 1900, who “defend[ed] Darwin’s own claim that he worked on ‘true Baconian principles’” (386). The defining factor between the two stances regarding Bacon’s theories comes down to the critic or theorist’s own scientific principles. People like Darwin “devoted their lives to natural science, rather than from workers in the pure field of conception, like Mill and Jevons” (qtd. in Rees 386). Regardless of opposition or cooperation with Baconianism, both “took Bacon seriously”, which is evident by the number of editions of *Novum Organum* that were printed in the mid- to late-1800s (386).

According to Rees, after three-hundred years since Bacon first presented his ideas, Baconianism started to wash away; the World Wars sped this declination up even more (387). This mostly began due to “philosophers, scientists, and historians, becoming indifferent or… hostile to the Baconian legacy. For many, Bacon ceased to matter” (387). J. R. Milton, professor of philosophy at King’s College, London, agrees in a more modern sense, stating that “Bacon has not of course been ignored or forgotten.… but professional philosophers have in recent times largely left him alone” (125). This is also evident in the lack of modern scholarly articles reviewing and critically analyzing Bacon’s work. Most reviews and criticisms following World War II analyze translations of Bacon’s essays, especially when discussing *Novum Organum*, instead of analyzing Bacon’s philosophies and theories.

*5. Analysis of Findings*

One of the larger findings I noticed as when reading through criticisms and the history of how Bacon’s essays were received from the 1600s through today seemed to be that when new ideas come up, the old ones tend to be pushed aside rather than absorbed or mixed into the new theories and philosophies. Starting with Bacon, he created this new way of scientifically testing nature in ways that conflicted with Aristotle’s concept of deduction. Instead of incorporating aspects of deduction into the induction theories Bacon started to invent, he disregarded Aristotle’s philosophy of learning through deduction and personal experience.

The same happens in future centuries with Bacon’s own concepts. As science improves, philosophies and theories come and go and alter, and human, societal, and worldly needs change, so does the ideology. As time passes, humankind increases overall knowledge, meaning new issues and new topics come up. With these newfound concepts and situations, new philosophies, theories, sciences, and methods must come up; usually resulting in something that conflicts with old understanding and positions.

I also found that new literature and even new inventions typically stem from some specific occurrences. One obvious example would be national turmoil. During Bacon’s time, if the monarchy behaved in a way that the citizens did not really favor, a new play or story based on the current climate was created. For example, *Taming of the Shrew* by William Shakespeare discusses the topic of women and power. When Kathrine refuses to marry and displays her power against the societal ideals that she needs to marry and have children, Shakespeare connects this issue in the play to the English societal concern of Elizabeth I not having a husband or child.

Church and religion seems to be a common topic that always boosts literature from time to time. In different areas of literature, religion comes up through different means, like poetic symbolism or satirical plays. Each literary time period has been influenced by issues and hot topics discussed during a specific time. For example, in Margery Kempe, the topic of women staying chaste for salvation posed an issue; some thought this was perfectly fine because doing so kept a woman pure, and others found faults in the concept such as the requirement of having children to further God’s teachings.

Another influence for new literature would be challenging current thought and ideology. Bacon did this well by taking previous scientific philosophies and questioning their worth and how to better observe and understand nature and science. As stated previously, he takes Aristotle’s educational theory of learning and decides that is not enough. He addressed a need for more scientific explanations for occurrences in nature. Thus, he challenged the philosophy by creating a new one.

The last thing I found while researching was how literature lasts for a long time. Not only does writing exist when first published, but the literature continues to be brought up and reevaluated. Bacon’s philosophies remained relevant for roughly three hundred years. Within the past fifty to a hundred years, the essays have started to decline in recognition in the field of natural sciences. This does not mean the literature dies; the words and essays are still available. In the next one-hundred years, the essays of Francis Bacon could arise again in popularity and may even need to be applied to science in the future.

This reappearance of past writings applies to all literature. Why do we continue to go back to Shakespeare’s plays, or Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* and *Of Mice and Men*, or Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*? There continues to be relatable topics and importance within pieces of literature. A story or poem or essay may lose popularity or interest in society for a period of time. That time could be decades, even centuries, but then a new spark initiates a new interest for these pieces of literature that were left to be found again.

*6. Current Understanding and Importance of Novum Organum and Sir Francis Bacon*

Sir Francis Bacon truly introduced the revolutionary genre of essay writing to English literature. Proposing philosophies and theories have been around forever, but writing in this precise, analytic way seems to be obscure during his time, yet so powerful.

Although Bacon’s language reads almost abstractly, like the literature comes from his consciousness to paper, the outlines of his thoughts and theories are very direct and stable (348). This main, concrete group of ideas makes up the whole entity so enticing as literature and addressing his philosophy written in *Novum Organum* (348).

Focusing on Bacon’s essay writing in total, his style begins a new world in literature. To write thoughts, observations, and opinions in ways that are not written poetically or indirectly as fables or satire collectively strikes as phenomenal. Bacon clearly sets up essay writing as a pivotal style and genre in English literature.

In particular, *Novum Organum* presents an optimal view on an example of one of Bacon’s most important works. As stated before, this work lasted for centuries, impacting not only English but science and philosophy as well. Taking the previous theory of deduction and challenging the idea with a new philosophy and theory of induction, presenting his opinions and philosophies in a straightforward method, and detailing in a systematic and conscious way, Bacon’s *Novum Organum* allows essay writing to flourish as a genre. The concepts he presents, in this stunning manner, enhances the science and theory as well as the literary aspects.

Sir Francis Bacon definitely serves a purpose in his field as well as literature. The ideas he presents, although not in the clearest ways, speak of opinion and philosophy in a way past writers did not voice. Instead of hiding behind other forms of literature that exhibit ideas in abstract, figurative language, Bacon addresses his thoughts and ideas and presents them openly, which also comes at a risk—one that previous authors never took.

*7. Conclusion*

Sir Francis Bacon introduced the scientific field a new way of research. By explaining his opinions and theories, science sprouted importance in a religion-dominate setting, and his theories carried on for centuries. Being so proud of his concepts, he hoped they would push science and be remembered and used for years to come. His philosophical and scientific place in history stands tall and remains there as he wished, but not as strong and as great as his literary stance. Even though his philosophies started to fade in importance around the late 1800s, his essay writing and presence in literature adds to the overall field permanently.

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