

FRANCIS BACON'S APHORISM AND EPIGRAMMATIC STYLE: A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

Dr. Sanjeev Tayal*

M.A. English, PhD, NTA UGC NET (English), India

Email ID: tayalsanjeev43@gmail.com

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Abstract

Bacon made essay the vehicle of conveying what he felt about various aspects of human transactions. He tells about a subject as much as he knows and does not try to exhaust the matter. He looks at the practical relevance of subjects usually considered theological or philosophical. He speaks on some of the subjects authoritatively not with the authority of a Plato or Aristotle or St. Augustine, but with the authority of a man who has a wide range of interests & first-hand experience of some of the things. His prose has regularity, uniformity, precision and balance, his tone is essentially impersonal & formal. Some of the characteristic features of Bacon's prose are clarity, precision & balance. Bacon is well known for his aphoristic style & sentences with three-fold balance. Bacon's method of development of the idea in every one of his essays is deductive. He precedes with a general statement, usually enumerating various aspects & than analyses the aspects one by one in the same order. Bacon makes brilliant use of quotation. He knows well whom & where an argument may run into boredom & staleness, and at the right moment he uses some quotations & similes becomes means to an end. Examples are too numerous to quote. His quotations are from diverse sources & his similes are fresh & apt. Bacon's essay, many of them are in the form of practical advice. E.g. 'Of Great Places' advises people holding and aspiring for high public offices to learn from the examples of others, to be serious but not to be taunting, to avoid delays, corruption & facility, & so on.

Paper Identification



**Corresponding Author*

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Introduction

Sir Francis Bacon was one of the greatest prose writers of English literature and language. His claim to greatness is based on his contribution to the development of the modern English prose and to the development of English prose style. He is among the finest prose artists of our language and especially of the Age of Shakespeare, late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. He is the father of the English Essay because he imported into English Literature a new genre of prose writing from France. Bacon has an almost encyclopedic range of mind and is gifted with great wisdom and versatility and his assertion that he has taken all knowledge to be his province is neither an idle boast nor an exaggeration. His essays amply bear him out on this point. He is similarly gifted with a keen observation, insight into human nature and affairs, and an amazingly quick eye for analogies. The range and variety of the topics of his essays are also pointers to his wide range of interest and versatility. His essays have become a storehouse of practical wisdom. Bacon terms his essays “dispersed meditations”, “counsels, civil and moral” and for this reason, they “come home to men’s business and bosom.” Again, in Bacon’s own words that is the reason of their popularity and utility”.

The popularity enjoyed by his ‘Essays’ is really remarkable. Almost four centuries have elapsed since the first edition of ‘Essays’ (1597) was published but the essays continue to be as widely, or perhaps much more, read widely, appreciated and admired as they had been in his own day, and his despite the most hostile and damaging attack on the essays and their author, of which Blake and Pope are representative example:

‘..... Good advice for Satan’s Kingdom’.

William Blake wrote this on his volume of Bacon’s

‘If parts allure thee think how Bacon shin’d

The wisest, brightest, meanest of mankind’

Pope has not restricted himself to Bacon’s work but he has attacked Bacon the man, his character and did not scruple to malign and demolish the literary and moral reputation of the man. But it must to the credit of the man that he could rest from his worst adversary the accolade of ‘The wisest, brightest... Of mankind’. Bacon’s qualities of intellect and literary genius were such that nobody could shut his eyes to those talents and accomplishments.

The language of Baconian essay is mostly simple, brief and clear with occasioned archaisms and Latinisms. Certain words are used in their older meaning and so they are different from their modern usage. Bacon's style is brilliant because of brevity, epigram, antithesis and balance of sentences.

Besides the simplicity of language, Bacon's prose is analytical, precise and organized. It is clear and straightforward. Bacon does not mind indulging in occasional conceits in his discourse but his Latinisms are scholarly and not pedantic. Bacon's chief aim was to put his ideas across and so he aims at clarity. His clarity and simplicity in relation to the educated and cultured readers and intellectual content of his essays are very high. Terseness is another quality of his style. Condensation of thought gave rise to the terseness of expression. For this purpose, Bacon uses appropriate words. He avoids superfluity of thought and language and in his earlier essays goes to the extent of avoiding the connectives. According to Will Durant, "Bacon abhors padding, and disdains to waste a word; he offers us infinite riches in a little phrase". Bacon's essay entitled 'Of Studies' is a classic example. Bacon possesses to an amazing degree the power of expressing into a few words a great body of thought. His style is aphoristic and epigrammatic and is perhaps the most quotable of English prose artist. His sentences, brief, rapid and forceful 'come down like the stroke of a hammer':

'Studies serve for delight, ornament, and for ability'.

'Crafty men condemn studies, simple men admire them, and wise men use them'.

'Read not to contradict and confute; not to believe and take for granted; nor to find talk and discourse; but to weigh and consider'.

'Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and reading an exact man'.

'To spend too much time in studies is sloth; to use them too much for ornament is affectation; to make judgment wholly by their rules, is the humour of a scholar'.

Such illustrations can be multiplied.

It may also be noted in this connection that as a lawyer Bacon was in the habit of weighing and judging the pros and cons of a question. When he marks some particular statement, he at once counter-balances it, to avoid any possible exaggeration, by giving the other side of the picture as well. Such weighing and balancing makes his style antithetical. For example, his arguments in the essay of Revenge, as in so many other essays, may be arranged in a tabular form thus:

His Beginnings

Another trick of style favourite with Bacon is to begin an essay with some fine aphorism, definition or a catching phrase. Thus the essay 'Of Cunning' begins with the fine definition of Cunning, and then it is contrasted with wisdom. Often his essays end with equally fine epigrams.

Quotations and Allusions: His Learning

Another important feature of Bacon's style is the extensive use of quotations, allusions and references. Thus Bacon uses broadcast throughout his essays. His style thus becomes a, "mosaic of quotations and allusions." There is quotation from the Bible, from the classics like Livy, Ovid, Virgil, Lucretius, Plato, Cicero, Aristotle, from the schoolmen of the middle ages and from history. All possible sources are laid into contribution by the essayist. He did not trouble about the accuracy of his quotations. He often misquotes. His citations may be inexact, but generally they are, more forceful, and always more serviceable to him than the exact words would have been, for he does not hesitate, to alter the original to bring it into harmony with its new context."

1. "Certainly, it is heaven upon earth, to have a man's mind none in charity, rest in providence, and turn upon the poles of truth." (Of Truth)
2. "He that hath wife and children hath given hostages to fortune. For they are impediments to great enterprise, either of virtue or mischief." (Of Marriage and Single life.)
3. "Men in great places are thrice servants." (Of Great Place)
4. "The rising unto place is laborious-the standing is more slippery." (Of Great Place.)
5. "Studies serve for delight for ornaments and for ability (Of Studies)

WIT

Bacon is the master of wit. What he lacks in emotional content, humour and pathos included, he more than makes up with his ready and impressive use of wit. Wit is the skilful employment of words at the most appropriate occasion. His quick and discerning eye for analogies, contrast, and incongruities provides him with occasion for the employment of wit:

"for a lie faces God, and shrinks from man." {Of Truth}

"Why, yet it is but like the throne or briar, which prick and scratch, because they can do no other." {Of Revenge}

"But base and crafty cowards are like the arrow that flieth in the dark." {Of Revenge}

"... Through indignities men rise to dignities". {Of Great Place}

"... by pain men come to greater pains" {Of Great Place}

The Influence of the Bible: Catholicism

Bacon has been condemned for his worldly wisdom and preoccupation with mundane considerations in the pursuit of which he puts the ordinary principal of morality and good sense to winds, while nobody can defend Bacon on the above charge, but there is no denying the fact that the Bible has a firm hold on his mind and we are not surprised when we come across such expressions as :

“... Clear and round dealing is the honour of man’s nature.....”{Of Truth}

“ Truth may perhaps come to the price of a pearl.....”{Of Truth}

“ Certainly it is heaven upon earth to have a man’s mind move in charity, rest in providence, and turn upon the poles of truth”.{Of Truth}

“It is the glory of a man to pass by an offence”.{Of Revenge}

“ Certainly, in taking revenge, a man is but even with his enemy, but in passing it over he is superior; for it is a prince’s part to pardon”.{Of Revenge}

Love of Imagery

Bacon’s love of imagery is a noticeable feature of Bacon’s prose style. Elizabethan Age is particularly rich in far-fetched conceits and metaphors but Bacon steers clear of any trait which may lead or contribute to confusion or obscurity. Bacon draws his imagery from familiar objects of nature or facts of everyday life.

“Virtue is like precious odours, most fragrant when they are incensed or crushed.”

“ Learning is both the lark that soars and sings and the hawk that soars and swoops.”

And some others that have already been quoted elsewhere in this essay.

Rhetorical Quality

Bacon is among the greatest rhetorician of all times. It should be worth while to remember that Bacon was a great parliamentary orator. The rhetorical qualities means the qualities of persuasion and of convincing, of swaying the mind of the readers. Bacon employs his extraordinary range of knowledge, his wide and varied experience, his intelligence, wisdom and keen analytical intellect and insight to great advantage. Bacon dazzles and persuades and convinces. He has few rivals and perhaps no superiors in the realm of English language and literature.