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## ‘Entering Upon That One Path’: Bacon’s Knightly Quest for Knowledge

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The frontispiece of Bishop Thomas Sprat’s *A History of the Royal Society* depicts the president of the Royal Society and Sir Francis Bacon sitting on either side of a bust of Charles II. The newly restored king, Charles, is labeled “Author and Patron of the Royal Society,” while Bacon, holding the seal of England, is denominated “Renovator of Arts.” Bacon points to artillery and mathematical instruments, and the background comprises more scientific instruments, including an air pump.

This image does not, however, accurately convey Bacon’s significant, if sometimes ambiguous, contributions to the beginnings of the Scientific Revolution. *The Proficiency and Advancement of Learning*, *The Great Instauration*, and *The New Organon* concentrate more on the method of inquiry rather than the content. In addition, Bacon’s mode of presenting his ideas about taxonomy, experimentation, and intellectual processes sometimes seem contradictory. Far from the “close, naked, and natural” style Sprat extols as the conduit of clear scientific prose, Bacon’s writing relies heavily on extended metaphors and tropes to describe his scientific visions. Frequent allusions to the Bible, references to classical mythology, and the use of common metaphors such as describing the relationship between different faculties of the mind as a “marriage” demonstrate Lisa Jardine’s assertion that, in Bacon’s writing:

Similitude and metaphor can be used to ‘get across’ abstruse knowledge to an ill-educated audience, and ... allegorical writing and extended metaphor used to clinch a point are ‘methods’ in their own right (172).

Peter Pesic and Stuart Peterfreund have discussed Bacon’s use of Biblical metaphor to support his advocacy of natural experimentation, but I would like to turn to a possibility mentioned only briefly by Peterfreund: that of Bacon’s use of the literary trope

of the quest. Acting as a kind of “meta-metaphor,” the quest is intended for a related end: to provide intellectual, political, and even religious rationale to justify the acceptance of the grand schemes and procedures that he envisioned in *The Great Instauration* and *The New Organon*. Peterfreund’s point of departure in his short discussion is Abraham Cowley’s poem, of questionable literary merit but significant historical value, which was the dedicatory ode to Sprat’s volume. Cowley compares Bacon to Moses:

Bacon, like Moses, led us forth at last,  
 The barren Wilderness he past,  
 Did on the very Border stand  
 Of the blest promis’d Land,  
 And from the Mountains Top of his Exalted Wit,  
 Saw it himself, and shew’d us it. (Cowley 93-98)

Peterfreund comments that Bacon’s project

takes on overtones of a providentially inscribed questromance, in the course of which the questing subject, chosen for the task at hand by divine providence, displays his worthiness to attain perfect inductive knowledge in pursuit of that knowledge (Peterfreund 120).

It is true that the budding seventeenth-century scientist was faced with the dilemma of engaging in scientific inquiry in the face of theological notions that compelled the acceptance of Godly sovereignty and inscrutability. It is also true that Bacon dealt with this dilemma partly by synthesizing the two areas of thought — to a modern mind inexorably separated — by making liberal use of the Bible and Christian doctrine. For instance, in *The Great Instauration* he analogizes between an appropriate scientific methodology and the Creation, which produced “light” on the first day and “material work” on subsequent days (12); he uses the Adamic naming process as an example of “pure and uncorrupted natural knowledge” (15) and is careful to invoke God’s aid at the end of the *Instauration* as the source and the object of intellectual inquiry. Peterfreund critiques this quest because of what he calls the “problematic replacement” of a Biblical master-narrative for the millennium-old Aristotelian schema of natural philosophy. However, this condemnation throws the baby out with the

bathwater. He seems to call the notion of the quest itself into question along with its content focus. Lisa Jardine and James Stephens have explored Bacon's paradoxical use of the fable, parable, and exemplum forms to stimulate interest in the issues of expanding scientific inquiry. But Bacon also adopts the framework, and sometimes even the language of the quest, a process of search for both interior and exterior knowledge with which his audience would have been very familiar. I argue that Bacon adopts the quest in form, if not in name, in order to create a bridge between older notions of epistemological inquiry and the new subject matter to which it will be applied.

Although there are several tales of quests which Bacon's readers would have known, the most famous would have been the adventures of the characters in Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* and Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. The goals of these quests focus on the development of the interior individual and the manifestation of that development in certain brave, even seemingly impossible feats in the service of others. When we think about characters such as Galahad or the Redcrosse Knight, we recognize that their quests result in not only Christian purification and military prowess, but also self-discovery, emotional maturity, and sharpened reasoning powers. We know that Galahad is on the "right path" when he is told by the old monk that he can fight two knights who signify deadly sins because Galahad is without sin (Malory, 261); we know the same about the Redcrosse Knight when he is taught by Fidelia in the House of Holinesse: "That she him taught celestiall discipline, / And opened his dull eyes, that light mote in them shine" (Spenser, 1.10, 18). The questor suffers various travails such as battles, torture, temptation, and recognizing and recovering from errors in judgment and action, and is rewarded with political accolades (such as a title), or with the spiritual rewards of salvation and transfiguration.

Bacon shuns the literary trappings of the medieval (or in Spenser's case, retro-medieval) romance; the champion of scientific thinking neither faces hordes of Saracens nor goes "pricking on the plaine" (Spenser 1.1, 1). But Bacon does embrace certain essential elements of the quest, which can be identified by their function despite the absence of armor, damp women brandishing swords, and evil Catholic hermits. One feature vital to Bacon's scientific project is not particularly related to the experimental method or

scientific taxonomy: the loyalty to the interests and goals of the monarch. Of all the fledgling scientific thinkers of the century, Bacon was probably the most aware of the need for the appropriate and constant application for patronage and approval to fund and publish one's work. In Spenser, the object of patronage is, famously, the shadowy figure of the Faerie Queene herself, the embodiment of goodness and wisdom who contrives the quest for the Redcrosse Knight. Bacon must do more than flatter: while he demonstrates considerable deftness in that art, he must also excite the monarch's interest in engaging in the type of quest on which he himself wants to embark. In *The Advancement of Learning*, the lengthy opening panegyric to James I includes not only the conventional nod to James's learning, but also a plea that James himself review previous practices for the "augmentation and propagation" of learning, to the end that James will exercise his "princely cogitations" for the purpose of advancing appropriate methodologies for intellectual advancement (2). In other words, Bacon wants to co-opt James' interest in intellectual pursuits and set the king on his own Baconian quest in order to popularize Baconian methods. This procedure has two consequences: as a practical matter, it can create a positive "public relations" effect just as any royal preference for fashion or religious doctrine can create a following. But it can also create a sense that the goal of the proposed project is a higher cause: of service to the common good or, in Bacon's own straightforward words, for "the benefit and use of life" (*Instauration* 15). The experimental scientist was forced to cope with the economic and social necessity of relying upon political approval, both from a monarch and from one's body of fellow scientists, and aligning one's interests with the ostensible interests of the monarch could serve both one's own and the larger good.

The process, as well as the rationale, for the quest is employed by Bacon. The initial realization that one's existing wisdom is insufficient is a necessary feature of preparing for the quest, and this notion is particularly well suited for application to inductive reasoning and the scientific method. The questor often runs into problems at first because he does not know how much he does not know. This motif is as old as Chretien de Troyes' Perceval, whose first reaction when he encounters knights, King Arthur's court, and a damsel in distress, is to insult or injure the

other party every time. The Redcrosse Knight is not so offensive, but begins his quest as a rural clownish figure, unaware of his name, his parentage, or even the source and significance of the armor he is wearing. The notion of interior knowledge is especially important to Bacon in preparing for and maintaining the quest for knowledge of the exterior natural world. Prefiguring Descartes, he comments on the need for an assessment and purgation of one's opinions prior to the quest (and note the figurative language of self-testing and battle in this statement): those who are "determined to make trial for themselves and put their own strength to the work of advancing the boundaries of the sciences" begin on the wrong foot if "yet they have not ventured to cast themselves completely loose from received opinions or to seek their knowledge at the fountain" (*Great Instauration* 10). This vigilance must continue throughout the quest in order for the seeker's path to remain straight and true; he warns against the danger that "as fast as old errors are destroyed new ones will spring up out of the ill complexion of the mind itself, and we shall have but a change of errors, and not a clearance" (*Great Instauration* 23). This statement also implies the innate nature of our lack of knowledge, making this process one of multiple steps, backward steps, and falling down and getting back up again. Expressed in this way, we can see similarities to the scientific process, which creates hypotheses, then tests and revises them when they do not work. Spenser's Duessa is still on the loose at the end of Book I, and the evils of complacency, pride in our own judgment, and irrational thinking can still plague the scientific questor at any point in his journey to knowledge.

Interestingly, the slow education of the individual in both the literary trope and Baconian intellectual methodology are explicitly expressed as constant battles with "error." Trial and error, literally, are the subject matter of the episodes of medieval romance: Dante opens the *Inferno* lost in the Wood of Error, having strayed from the righteous path after Beatrice's death. The Redcrosse Knight immediately runs into a dragon who is even named Error. Bacon's primary target as the source of error throughout *The New Organon* is, of course, Aristotle. "The Master of Those Who Know," in Dante's words, was to Bacon a crippling master who prevented real advancement of knowledge. Bacon was determined to rid this new subject matter, the "New Science," of the strictures of Aristotelian epistemology. While Bacon wrote approvingly of many classical

thinkers, including Plato, Cicero, and Cato, and did seem to concur with some of Aristotle's views on ethics, criticism of Aristotelian natural philosophy are rife throughout Bacon's works. In *The New Organon* Bacon complains that Aristotle contributed to the Idols of the Cave by making "his natural philosophy a mere bond servant to his logic" (54), to the Idols of the Marketplace by creating linguistic fictions "which owe their origin to false and idle theories (57), and to the Idols of the Theater by being the "most conspicuous example" of the class of philosophers who base their conclusions on "too narrow a foundation of experiment and natural history" (60, 59). In the *Advancement of Learning*, he asserts that Aristotle's lack of concern for inductive experimentation is a "negligent opinion" (79).

So what is the nascent scientist supposed to do in the face of centuries of error? Just as the eventual St. George learns to trust Una and not fling himself into conflicts without preparation, and just as Dante faithfully follows the guidance of Vergil and Beatrice, the disciple of rational scientific thinking must have a plan and aids on which to rely when he falls. Bacon has several recommendations. The language of *The Great Instauration* is very physical as it describes the need to know one's subject matter: "For a good method of demonstration or form of interpreting nature may keep the mind from going astray or stumbling" but those "who aspire not to guess and divine, but to discover and know, who propose...to examine and dissect the nature of this very world itself, but go to facts themselves for everything" (*Great Instauration*, 23). In this way we can avoid building upon incorrect interpretation of facts that have long since perpetuated error. Of course, Bacon advocates the method of induction, but not the "puerile" form of inductive thinking in which information is just enumerated, rather the process of experimentation, in which we "analyze experience and take it to pieces." Bacon is adamant that this task is longer and more complex than simple description, and requires a humble devotion to observation of the "facts themselves": "how much more labor must we be prepared to bestow upon this other, which is extracted not merely out of the depths of the mind, but out of the very bowels of nature" (*Great Instauration*, 21). And, aware of the fallibility of sense perception, Bacon insists that experiment follow observation, "that the experiment itself shall judge of the thing" (22). Faithful adherence

to the method and constant watchfulness are the best helpmeets against the dragons and wild beasts of personal bias, sensory misapprehension, and reliance on old, untested knowledge.

With Perceval, Dante, Galahad, and St. George, the scientific questor also shares the ultimate goal of approaching the divine; however, in this case, the divine does not consist of personal salvation but is more analogous to the search for knowledge of the mysteries of faith: “divine truth.” This is also the point at which, to a modern mind, Bacon can appear particularly unscientific (current discussions of intelligent design notwithstanding). Ironically, he is convinced that, in an Aristotelian way, the attainment of accurate knowledge is a spiritually uplifting experience. He says in *The Advancement of Learning* that “a little or superficial knowledge of philosophy may incline the mind of man to atheism, but a further proceeding therein doth bring the mind back again to religion” (*Advancement*, 4). This suggestion is made more explicit in *The Great Instauration*, as he concludes that our goal is to identify a “true vision of the footsteps of the Creator imprinted on his creatures” (*Great Instauration*, 29), thereby conjoining knowledge of the natural world and knowledge of its divine maker. In this sense, the Baconian quest is a much larger and potentially more significant one than those of the models he uses. Bacon’s goal is not just understanding of the self and our impact on our immediate surroundings, but the joint goals of “those twin objects, human knowledge and human power” (29).

In the trope of the quest, Bacon is able to pull from an older mode of thinking about intellectual, social, and spiritual development, and mimic that process as he argues for its applicability to growth and maturity in scientific endeavors. He should not only be labeled a “Renovator of Arts,” but also as a renovator of a primary poetic trope in the effort to spur productive intellectual growth. In commenting on Bacon’s attitudes towards rhetoric and poetry, John L. Harrison notes that “Bacon faces toward the past rather than toward the future” as he considers allegory a primary teaching tool to help explain the mysteries of nature (Harrison, 267). The use of the quest motif enables Bacon to position himself literally as the champion of the New Science, and thus achieve two potentially conflicting ends: defining the straight and narrow path to truer and purer scientific knowledge, and, in his words, maintaining that realm of knowledge for both

“the wisest and most learned of kings” and within the “limits of duty in respect of things divine” (*Great Instauration* 6, 15).

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