

# The Esoteric Francis Bacon

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## Bacon and Esotericism

The writings of Francis Bacon contain numerous discussions of esotericism. In a general sense, the essay “Of Simulation and Dissimulation” stresses the importance of knowing “what things are to be laid open, and what to be secreted, and what to be showed at half lights, and to whom and when.” In *New Atlantis*, members of the scientific fraternity “take all an oath of secrecy, for the concealing of those [inventions and discoveries] which we think fit to keep secret.” In *The Advancement of Learning* Bacon distinguishes between “disclosed” (exoteric) and “enigmatical” (esoteric) writing, the latter allowing the author “to remove the vulgar capacities from being admitted to the secrets of knowledges, and to reserve them to selected auditors, or wits of such sharpness as can pierce the veil.” In *Valerius Terminus* he again extols the practice of esoteric writing “both for the avoiding of abuse in the excluded, and the strengthening of affection in the admitted.” Hence it is possible that we do not yet fully understand Bacon; the first serious attempt to investigate his religious opinions was Steven Matthews’s excellent 2008 book *Theology and Science in the Thought of Francis Bacon*. In the present essay, I argue that Bacon was prone to visionary or religious experiences, about which he wrote in the form of alchemical tracts published under a number of pseudonyms.

Bacon’s capacity for nuanced writing is shown in his response to Machiavelli. Exoterically, when Bacon alludes to Machiavelli his tone is of deference or respect; but if we dig deeper, most of these allusions are actually pointing to a book known as *Anti-Machiavel*, a vitriolic rebuttal to the Florentine originally published in French in 1576. In over fifty places, Bacon’s writings parallel *Anti-Machiavel* closely; collectively, these allusions suggest that Bacon intended them to be discovered at a later date, and that he did not want his true opinion of Machiavelli known at the time. Possibly this is because Machiavelli was held in high regard by politicians and courtiers; *Anti-Machiavel* complains “he is of no reputation in the court of France who has not Machiavelli’s writings at the

fingers' ends, both in the Italian and French tongues, and can apply his precepts to all purposes, as the oracles of Apollo." Bacon may have thought adopting a hostile tone towards the Florentine would jeopardize the reception of his reform of knowledge and philosophy; for he also wrote "I like better that entry of truth which comes peaceably, as with chalk to mark up those minds which are capable to lodge and harbor such a guest, than that which forces its way with pugnacity and contention." (This "lodge and harbor" locution also occurs at a key point in *The Tomb of Semiramis*, an alchemy text published in the late seventeenth century.)

Another example of Bacon's remarkable capacity for esoteric writing is found in the *Novum Organum*:

We ought to make a collection or particular history of all monsters and prodigious births or productions; and, in a word, of everything new, rare, and extraordinary in nature. But this must be done with the most severe scrutiny, lest we depart from truth. Above all, every relation must be considered as suspicious which depends in any degree upon religion, as the prodigies of Livy: and no less so everything that is to be found in the writers on natural magic or alchemy, or such authors who seem all of them to have an unconquerable appetite for falsehood and fable.

This is actually a complicated allusion to Francois Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel*:

I find by the ancient Historiographers and Poets, that divers have been born in this world after very strange manners, which would be too long to repeat; read therefore the seventh chapter of Pliny, if you have so much leisure: yet have you never heard of any so wonderful as that of Pantagruel . . . I pass by here the relation of how at every one of his meals he supped the milk of four thousand and six hundred Cows.

The parallels are labored: compare "particular history" and "Historiographers"; "prodigious births" and "born in this world after very strange manners"; "prodigies of Livy" and "seventh chapter of Pliny"; "unconquerable appetite" and "supped the milk of four thousand six hundred Cows." Bacon is taking pains to alert us to Rabelais, I believe, because he was then (as now) the most explicit major author with regard to alchemy.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Gargantua and Pantagruel* abounds with alchemical language and Rabelais introduces himself as the "abstractor of the quintessence." The fifth book, whose authorship is uncertain, has a passage strongly suggestive of Bacon's reform of philosophy:

"'tis the Novelty of the Experiment, which makes Impressions of their conceptive, cogitative Faculties . . . Be Spectators and Auditors of every particular Phaenomenon, and every individual

## Alchemy

A great deal of confusion still surrounds the subject of alchemy; its origins, purposes, etc. We shall see that there is no great mystery; first, we note this curious passage written by Lord Macaulay in 1837:

In truth, much of Bacon's life was passed in a visionary world, amidst things as strange as any that are described in the Arabian Tales, or in those romances on which the curate and barber of Don Quixote's village performed so cruel an *auto-da-fe*, amidst buildings more sumptuous than the palace of Aladdin, fountains more wonderful than the golden water of Parizade, conveyances more rapid than the hippogryph of Ruggiero, arms more formidable than the lance of Astolfo, remedies more efficacious than the balsam of Fierabras.

This is not the Bacon most readers know; where did Macaulay obtain this information? did he read this somewhere? I suggest that Macaulay knew of Bacon's authorship of a number of alchemy tracts; moreover, he understood them perfectly well, telling us of Bacon's "remedies more efficacious than the balsam of Fierabras." Bacon's *Sylva Sylvarum* is replete with recipes for such remedies—including opium "mingled with spirit of wine" and the "leaf of burrage" which "hath an excellent spirit to repress the fuliginous vapour of dusky melancholy, and so to cure madness":

if the leaf be infused long, it yieldeth forth but a raw substance, of no virtue: therefore I suppose that if in the must of wine or wort of beer, while it worketh, before it be tunned, the burrage stay a small time, and be often changed with fresh; it will make a sovereign drink for melancholy passions. And the like I conceive of orange flowers.

Often said to originate in Alexandria, the language of alchemy appears in fact to have been invented by Taoists around the first or second century BCE. At the time, Taoism and Confucianism were discouraged by the Chinese state, who favored the philosophy of Legalism and occasionally employed persecution in events such as the "burning of books and burying of scholars" in 213-12 BCE. This suggests the possibility that alchemy represents an older shamanic oral tradition (with which Taoism was rife) committed to writing and sent abroad under persecution—which, according to political philosopher Leo Strauss,

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Proposition, within the extent of my Mansion, satiate your selves with all that can fall here under the Consideration of your Visual and Auscultating Powers, and thus emancipate yourselves from the Servitude of Crassous Ignorance."

“gives rise to a peculiar technique of writing, and therewith to a peculiar type of literature, in which the truth about all crucial things is presented exclusively between the lines.”

A distinction has often been made between eastern and western forms of alchemy; this seems unwarranted, and as we move from east to west, we will notice that the essential content remains the same, it just becomes more elaborately concealed, adopting more and more extraneous “cover” material in the process. Although it does not use alchemical terms, we will begin in Japan with an amusing story about “laughing mushrooms” from the 11<sup>th</sup>-century *Konjaku monogatari* (“Tales of Long Ago”), which contains a good deal of older material from China:

Long long ago, some woodcutters from Kyoto went into the Kitayama mountains and lost their way. Not knowing which way to go, four or five of them were lamenting their condition when they heard a group of people coming from the depths of the mountains. The woodcutters were wondering suspiciously what sort of people it might be when four or five Buddhist nuns came out dancing and singing. Seeing them, the woodcutters became fearful, thinking things like, “Dancing, singing nuns are certainly not human beings but must be goblins or demons.” And when the nuns saw the men and started straight toward them, the woodcutters became very frightened and wondered, “How is it that nuns come thus out of the very depths of the mountains dancing and singing!”

The nuns then said, “Our appearance dancing and singing has no doubt frightened you. But we are simply nuns who live nearby. We came to pick flowers as offerings to Buddha, but after we had all entered the hills together we lost our way and couldn’t remember how to get out. Then we came upon some mushrooms, and although we wondered whether we might not be poisoned if we ate them, we were hungry and decided it was better to pick them than to starve to death. But after we had picked and roasted them we found they were quite delicious, and thinking, “Aren’t these fine!” we ate them. But then as we finished the mushrooms we found we couldn’t keep from dancing. Even as we were thinking, “How strange! strangely enough we . . .” The woodcutters were no end surprised at this unusual story.

But the woodcutters were very hungry so they thought, “Better than dying let’s ask for some too.” And they ate some of the numerous mushrooms that the nuns had picked, whereupon they also were compelled to dance. In that condition the nuns and the woodcutters laughed and danced round and round together. After a while the intoxication seemed to wear off and somehow they all found their separate ways home. After this the mushrooms came to be called *maitake*, dancing mushrooms.

When we think about it this is a striking story. For even though we still have this kind of mushroom, people who eat them do not dance. Thus this exceedingly strange story has been handed down.

By western standards, the Chinese texts are fairly explicit; the Taoist classic *Wuzhen pian* says “The work is easy and the medicine is not far away. If the secret is disclosed, it will be so simple that every one may get a good laugh.” Jean Cooper writes in *Chinese Alchemy: The Taoist Quest for Immortality*:

Herbal medicines and drugs play a more important part in Chinese alchemy than in the western branches. Plant-produced drugs were supposed to give quick but more transient results, while those from minerals were slower but surer . . . although authorities like Ko Hung assert that metals produce better results in this world, it must be remembered that the immortals of the Isle of P’eng used herbs, since the herbs of immortality grew there and it was to obtain these that the various expeditions were mounted.<sup>2</sup>

In the monumental classic *Science and Civilization in China*, Joseph Needham and Gwei-Djen Lu conjectured:

there is much reason for thinking that the ancient Taoists experimented systematically with hallucinogenic smokes, using techniques which arose directly out of liturgical observance . . . the incense-burner remained the centre of changes and transformations associated with worship, sacrifice, ascending perfume of sweet savour, fire, combustion, disintegration, transformation, vision, communication with spiritual beings, and assurances of immortality. *Wai tan* and *nei tan* met around the incense-burner. Might one not indeed think of it as their point of origin?<sup>3</sup>

Ko Hung’s *Pao P’u Tzu*:

Ch’eng Wei tried to make gold according to the directions of the *Vast Treasure in the Pillow*. He was unsuccessful, and his wife, going to look at him, found him just fanning the ashes in order to heat the retort. In the retort was some quicksilver. She said: “Just let me see what I can do,” and from her pocket produced a drug, a small quantity of which she threw into the retort. A very short while afterwards she took the retort out of the furnace, and there was solid silver all complete!

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<sup>2</sup> Cooper, Jean. *Chinese Alchemy: The Taoist Quest for Immortality*. New York: Sterling, 1990

<sup>3</sup> Science and Civilization in China: Vol. 5, 1974 p. 154 Gwei-Djen Lu Science and Civilisation in China: Volume 5, Chemistry and Chemical Technology, Part 2, Spagyric Discovery and Invention: Magisteries of Gold and Immortality

*Ssu-ma Ch-ien's Historical Memoirs:*

It was after this discourse that the Son of Heaven for the first time performed in person the sacrifices of the furnace... He occupied himself in experiments with powdered cinnabar, and all sorts of drugs, in order that he might obtain gold.

*Shen-nung pen-ts'ao ching:*

Ma-fen [cannabis] if taken in excess will produce hallucinations. If taken over a long time, it makes one communicate with spirits and lightens one's body.

*Meng Shen, Shih-liao pen-ts'ao:*

Those people who want to see spirits use raw ma fruits, *Ch'ang-p'u*, and *K'uei-chiu* in equal parts, pound them into pills the size of marbles and take one facing the sun every day. After one hundred days, one can see spirits.

*The Upper Scripture of Purple Texts Inscribed by Spirits:*

Once the floriate elixir is finished, one ounce constitutes a "transcendent dose." If one wishes to remain in the mundane world, half an ounce is sufficient.

The fruit of this tree will be ring shaped. Its name is the Tree of Ringed Adamant. Eating its fruit causes you to be born together with the heavens and rise up to the Grand Bourne, your form transformed into clouds.

*Sun Guanxian, Beimeng suoyan:*

Xianke said, "We have numinous herbs and can only practice flying steps. Today the whole household is secluded in the rear mountains and further cultivates Taoist methods. As for the matter of direct ascension, how could I have expectations therein? We only have long life and that is all."

Moving on to India, the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali (first centuries CE), states "the subtler attainments come with birth or are attained through herbs, mantra, austerities, or concentration." In the eleventh century, Iranian scholar Al-Biruni wrote "[The Hindus] have a science similar to alchemy which is quite peculiar to them. They call it *rasayana*. It means an art which is restricted to certain operations, drugs, and compound medicines, most of which are taken from plants."

In Arabic alchemy, Amir Ahmad's *Mahsati-Roman* (12<sup>th</sup> century) states: "It is hashish that brings enlightenment to reason; but he who devours it like food will become a donkey. The elixir is moderation; eat of it just one grain,

so that it can permeate your existence like gold.” Muḥammad ibn Umayl al-Tamīmī’s *Silvery Water, or The Chemical Tables of Senior Zadith* (tenth century): “There are two vapors: the light and the heavy. They are the steam and the smoke. They are the dry and the moist. The smoke is the dry, the steam is the moist. The smoke is the soul, the steam is the spirit, and it is the moist.” The *Turba Philosophorum* (tenth century): “O how many are the seekers after this gum, and how few there are who find it! Know ye that our gum is stronger than gold, and all those who know it do hold it more honorable than gold . . . Our gum, therefore, is for Philosophers more precious and more sublime than pearls.” The *Book of Morienus*, which was the first Arabic alchemy text translated into Latin (by Robert of Chester in 1144):

This stone is of delicate touch, and there is more mildness in its touch than in its substance. Of sweet taste, and its proper nature is aerial.

Khalid said: Tell me of its odor, before and after its confection.

Morienus answered: Before confectioning, its odor is very heavy and foul. I know of no other stone like it nor having its powers. While the four elements are contained in this stone, it being thus like the world in composition, yet no other stone like it in power or nature is to be found in the world, nor has any of the authorities ever performed the operation other than by means of it. And the compositions attempted by those using anything else in this composition will fail utterly and come to nothing. The thing in which the entire accomplishment of this operation consists of the red vapor, the yellow vapor, the white vapor, the green lion, ocher, the impurities of the dead and of the stones, blood, eudica, and foul earth.

Begin in the Creator’s name, and with his vapor take the whiteness from the white vapor. The whole key to accomplishment of this operation is in the fire, with which the minerals are prepared and the bad spirits held back, and with which the spirit and body are joined.

In answer to your question about the white vapor, or virgin’s milk, you may know that it is a tincture and spirit of those bodies already dissolved and dead, from which the spirits have been withdrawn. It is the white vapor that flows in the body and removes its darkness, or earthiness, and impurity, uniting the bodies into one and augmenting their waters.

Without the white vapor, there could have been no pure gold nor any profit in it.

Hence there is no mystery about alchemy; from the beginning, it was only a cover to discuss the visionary properties of cannabis. All throughout the literature, going all the way back to China, you see the refrain: “our gold is

not common gold." Bacon cannot have been unaware of this; John Lyly's *Euphues and His England* (1578), which was very popular in its time, states "There is an Herb in India, of pleasant smell, but who so commeth to it, feeleth pleasant smart, for there breed in it, a number of small Serpents." Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), which some have ascribed to Bacon, speaks of "bhang, like in effect to opium, which puts them for a time into a kind of ecstasis, and makes them gently to laugh." Rabelais wrote the following about the plant:

In this Pantagruelion have I found so much Efficacy and Energy, so much Completeness and Excellency, so much Exquisiteness and Rarity, and so many admirable Effects and Operations of a transcendent Nature, that if the Worth and Virtue thereof had been known, when those Trees, by the Relation of the Prophet, made election of a Wooden King to rule and govern over them, it without all doubt would have carried away from all the rest the Plurality of Votes and Suffrages.

"The Water Poet" John Taylor's *Praise of Hemp Seed* (1620) speaks of hemp in explicitly alchemical terms:

Apothecaries were not worth a pin,  
If Hempseed did not bring their comings in;  
Oils, Unguents, Syrups, Minerals, and Balms,  
(All Natures treasures, and th' Almighty's alms,)  
Emplasters, Simples, Compounds, sundry drugs  
With Necromantic names like fearful Bugs,  
Fumes, Vomits, purges, that both cures, and kills,  
Extractions, conserves, preserves, potions, pills,  
Elixers, simples, compounds, distillations,  
Gums in abundance, brought from foreign nations.

Ovid 'mongst all his Metamorphosis  
Ne're knew a transformation like to this,  
Nor yet could Oedipus e're understand,  
How to turn Land to smoke, and smoke to Land.  
For by the means of this bewitching smother,  
One Element is turn'd into another,  
As Land to fire, fire into Airy matter,  
From air (too late repenting) turns to water.

By Hempseed thus, fire, water, air, earth, all



Are chang'd by pudding, leaf, roll, pipe and ball.

Tobacco was new and very popular in England around the turn of the seventeenth century; needless to say, not everyone approved, and some writers took advantage of the controversy to write about cannabis under the cover of tobacco. This includes the Earl of Essex, whose poem "The Poor Laboring Bee" speaks thusly:

What though thou dye'st my lungs in deepest black.  
A Mourning habit, suits a sable heart.  
What though thy fumes sound memory do crack,  
forgetfulness is fittest for my smart.  
O sacred fume, let it be Carv'd in oak,  
that words, Hopes, wit, and all the world are smoke.

Sir John Beaumont's *Metamorphosis of Tobacco* (1602):

Infume my brain, make my soul's powers subtle,  
Give nimble cadence to my harsher style:  
Inspire me with thy flame, which doth excel  
The purest streams of the Castalian well,  
That I on thy ascensive wings may fly  
By thine ethereal vapors borne on high,  
And with thy feathers added to my quill  
May pitch thy tents on the Parnassian hill,  
Teach me what power thee on earth did place,  
What God was bounteous to the humane race,  
On what occasion, and by whom it stood,  
That the blest world receiv'd so great a good.

For this our praised plant on high doth soar,  
Above the baser dross of earthly ore,  
Like the brave spirit and ambitious mind,  
Whose eaglet's eyes the sunbeams cannot blind;  
Nor can the clog of poverty depress  
Such souls in base and native lowliness,  
But proudly scorning to behold the Earth,  
They leap at crowns, and reach above their birth.

Roger Marbecke, *Defense of Tobacco* (1602):

For take but Monardus's own tale; and by him it should seem; that in the taking of Tobacco they [the priests] were drawn up; and separated from all gross, and earthly cogitations, and as it were carried up to a more pure and clear region, of fine conceits

& actions of the mind, in so much, as they were able thereby to see visions, as you say: & able likewise to make wise and sharp answers, and ecstasies, as we are wont to call it, have the power and gift thereby, to see more wonders, and high mystical matters, then all they can do, whose brains, & cogitations, are oppressed with the thick and foggy vapours of gross, and earthly substances... but being used to clear the brains, and thereby making the mind more able, to come to herself, and the better to exercise her heavenly gifts, and virtues; me think, as I have said, I see more cause why we should think it to be a rare gift imparted unto man, by the goodness of God, than to be an invention of the devil.

Jan Amos Komensky (or Comenius) was an early proponent of Bacon's philosophical reform on the European continent; his *Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart* (1631) speaks thusly of the "mishaps of alchemists":

Another burned his eyes out, and was thus unable to supervise the calcination and the fixation: or bleared his sight with smoke to such an extent that before he cleared his eyes the nitrogen escaped. Some died of asphyxiation from the smoke. But for the greatest part they did not have enough coal in their bags and were obliged to run about to borrow it elsewhere, while in the meantime their concoction cooled off and was utterly ruined. This was of very frequent, in fact of almost constant, occurrence. Although they did not tolerate anyone among themselves save such as possessed full bags, yet these seemed to have a way of drying up very rapidly, and soon grew empty: they were obliged either to suspend their operations or to run away to borrow.

Benedictus Figulus, *Pandora magnalium naturalium aurea et benedicta de Paracelse* (Strasbourg, 1608): "It is this most famous medicine which philosophers have been wont to call their Stone, or Powder. This is its fount and fundament, and the Medicine whereby Aesculapius raised the dead. This is the herb by which Medea restored Jason to life." The autobiographical account in this book reads very much as though it might have been written by Bacon:

When reviewing the whole course of my studies, from my youth up, I find – and have indeed hitherto found in my work, and clearly experienced more and more with the lapse of time, as daily experience shows is wont to happen to the true believer and right naturalist – that there are three kinds of Philosophy or Wisdom, of which the world partly makes use, some more than others, some of this and others of that . . . the First is the Common Philosophy of Aristotle, of Plato, and of our own time, which is but a Cagastrian Philosophy, Speculation, and Phantasy, with which, even at the present day, all the Schools are filled, and by which they are befouled, and beloved

youth thereby led astray. The same is inane, erroneous, empty chatter; and far removed from the foundation of Truth. Even at the present day it is blasphemously defended, tooth and nail, with all sorts of opinions, ideas, imaginations, and erroneous thoughts of the old heathen (who were held to be Sages), which were accepted as the Truth. . .

This Philosophy, although, from my youth up, it was earnestly and diligently inculcated, and forced upon me, in the Schools (as unfortunately occurs to others at the present day), yet, by special interposition of the Holy Spirit, it became so suspected by me that I never would, nor could, torture my head, mind, and soul with it, nor persuade my heart that the same was a sacred thing, nor cleave unto it as others did; but, according to my childish judgment, let the matter rest there until, about the year 1587 or 1588, another philosophy came into my hands. At the same time I had, in my own mind, firmly resolved not to remain the least among my fellow scholars, but in due time to graduate in advance of all.

This sounds very much like Bacon's famous letter to his uncle Lord Burghley, in which he says "I have taken all knowledge for my province." Figulus continues:

But it has pleased God otherwise in His Divine Providence, and all sorts of impediments on the part of my superiors hindered the course of my studies, until at last, in 1587-88, the books and writings of Theophrastus, of Roger Bacon, and of M. Isaac the Hollander, fell into my hands; in which I, especially in medicine (for they wrote about the Universal Stone and Medicine), saw and found a better foundation, and yet understood it not at first. But I took such a liking to the subject that I resolved not to die, nor yet to take my ease, until I had obtained this Universal Stone and Blessed Heavenly Medicine. However, the poverty of my parents and the impossibility of obtaining the necessary funds (for at that time but few princes and nobles patronized this study) compelled me unwillingly to relinquish my plan, although I was so eager for it that, for many months, I could not sleep on account of it. At last, in 1590, I found myself plunged by the devil and his friends into great misery, misfortune, and sickness, out of which God mercifully helped me when my death would have been preferred to my recovery, and when, from reasons of poverty, I had been held to commerce against my will, by my relatives, suffering all manner of persecution, partly from the Anti-Christian mob, partly from false brethren, wife and friends, tortured, plagued and agitated, and thus thoroughly tried by the devil. But having been rescued from the same by God's fatherly care, I turned my attention for some years to poetry, whereunto, when I found that it was irksome to all, I said good bye...

Homer's *Odyssey* relates the story of Hermes supplying Odysseus with the magical plant Moly to ward off the magic of Circe. Theocritus, the father of Greek pastoral poetry, calls Moly "the most effective of magic drugs"; Theophrastus, the father of botany, states "it is used against spells and magic arts." Pliny's *Natural History* says it has "power over the most potent sorceries"; Hesychius calls it "an antidote or herb; a remedy for suffering." This was included in the same 1608 book by Benedictus Figulus quoted above:

I call it the Flower of Honey,  
The Flower known to the Wise. . .  
Homer knew it well, and called it Moly.  
The god Mercury offered it to Ulysses,  
Even unto Ulysses in his wanderings,  
As a precaution against the sorcery of Circe.  
The gods also have bestowed it upon man  
As a singularly great gift,  
Designed to assuage and comfort him.

Later, Michael Maier invoked the term in the alchemical *Septimana Philosophica* (1620, Frankfurt):

Long have I had in my nostrils the scent of the herb moly which became so celebrated thanks to the poets of old . . . this herb is entirely chemical. It is said that Odysseus used it to protect himself against the poisons of Circe and the perilous singing of the Sirens. It is also related that Mercury himself found it and that it is an effective antidote to all poisons. It grows plentifully on Mount Cyllene in Arcadia.

This last line is an allusion to Ovid.

## **The writings of "Eugenius Philalethes" and "Eirenaeus Philalethes"**

A number of people have ascribed the alchemy texts published under the name Philalethes (lover of truth) to Bacon. The "Eugenius Philalethes" texts were from 1650-55; they consist of the following:

1650: *Anthroposophia Theomagica*

*Anima Magica Abscondita*

*Magia Adamica*

*Coelum Terrae*

*The Man-Mouse Taken in a Trap* (a response to Cambridge Platonist Henry More, who had attacked Philalethes in a pamphlet)

1651: *Lumen de Lumine: Or a New Magical Light*

*The Second Wash: Or the Moore scoured once more* (another rejoinder to More)

1652: *Aula Lucis, or The House of Light* (“by S.N. a modern speculator”)

*The Fame and Confession of the Fraternity of R.C.* (an English translation of the Rosicrucian manifestos, done by “an unknown hand”)

1655: *Euphrates, or The Waters of the East*

Usually attributed to Welsh minister Thomas Vaughan, twin brother of better-known metaphysical poet Henry Vaughan, these texts have many parallels in Bacon. The supremely confident tone and accomplished prose style of this author do not seem like the voice of an obscure Welsh clergyman—dismissed from his post for royalist sympathies after less than a year (the Vaughans had served kings for centuries)—however it does resemble a relaxed Francis Bacon. *Aula Lucis*:

It is my design to make over my reputation to a better age, for in this I would not enjoy it, because I know not any from whom I would receive it.

Bacon, last will:

For my name and memory, I leave it to men's charitable speeches, to foreign nations, and the next ages.

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*Aula Lucis*:

future times, wearied with the vanities of the present, will perhaps seek after the truth and gladly entertain it. Thus you will see what readers I have predestined for myself

Bacon, *Valerius Terminus*:

publishing in a manner whereby it shall not be to the capacity nor taste of all, but shall as it were single out and adopt his reader, is not to be laid aside, both for the avoiding of abuse in the excluded, and the strengthening of affection in the admitted

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*Aula Lucis*:

I could never affect anything that was barren, for sterility and love are inconsistent. Give me a knowledge that is fertile in performances, for theories without their effects are but nothings in the dress of things

Bacon, *Valerius Terminus*:

Knowledge that tendeth but to satisfaction is but as a courtesan, which is for pleasure and not for fruit or generation

Bacon, *The Great Instauration*:

That wisdom which we have derived principally from the Greeks is but like the boyhood of knowledge, and has the characteristic property of boys: it can talk, but it cannot generate; for it is fruitful of controversies but barren of works

*Aula Lucis* states in its opening “It will be questioned perhaps by the envious to what purpose these sheets are prostituted, and especially that drug wrapped in them—the Philosopher’s Stone.” Philalethes frequently quotes “the divine Virgil” “who was a great poet but a greater philosopher.” Francis Bacon felt the same, citing “the best poet [known] to the memory of man” more than any other author, but usually in a scientific or philosophical context.<sup>4</sup> Bacon wrote “certain critics are used to say hyperbolically, that if all sciences were lost, they might be found in Virgil”;<sup>5</sup> *Anti-Machiavel* avers:

if our youths gave themselves only to Virgil to learn all Latin poetry, it is enough; and that author alone, compared to whom all others are but small rivers, might teach them all the poetry that need be known . . . he who well understands Virgil has no need of others for the understanding of poetry. And in every science it seems to be the best,

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<sup>4</sup> Schuler, Robert M. “Francis Bacon and Scientific Poetry.” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, vol. 82, no. 2, American Philosophical Society, 1992, pp. i–65,

<sup>5</sup> This locution is also in *Don Quixote*: “if the statutes and ordinances of knight errantry were lost, they might be found again in your breast.”

that men may well employ their time, which is dear and short, to read few books, to make good choice of them, and to understand them well.

This sounds like Bacon's famous aphorism: "Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested."

Bacon frequently quotes the fragment of Heraclitus ("the obscure," "the weeping philosopher") "dry light is best soul"; *Aula Lucis*:

hence it is that I move in the sphere of generation and fall short of that test of Heraclitus: "Dry light is best soul"

*Wisdom of the Ancients*:

it was excellently said by Heraclitus, "A dry light makes the best soul."

*Novum Organum*:

the human understanding resembles not a dry light, but admits a tincture of the will and passions which generate their own system accordingly.

Bacon, "Of Friendship":

it is in truth of operation upon a man's mind, of like virtue as the alchymists use to attribute to their stone for man's body; that it worketh all contrary effects, but still to the good and benefit of nature. But yet without praying in aid of alchmyists, there is manifest image of this in the ordinary course of nature . . . Heraclitus saith well in one of his enigmas, "Dry light is ever the best." And certain it is, that the light that a man receiveth by counsel from another, is drier and purer than that which cometh from his own understanding and judgment; which is ever infused and drenched in his affections and customs.

*Anthroposophia Theomagica* features a title page echoing that of Bacon's *Novum Organum*, which also quotes Daniel 12:4: "Many shall go to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased." It also echoes Bacon's criticisms of Aristotle:

Aristotle is a poet in text; his principles are but fancies, and they stand more on our concessions than his bottom. Hence it is that his followers, notwithstanding the assistance of so many ages, can fetch nothing out of him but notions . . . their compositions are a mere tympany of terms. It is better than a fight in *Quixote* to observe what duels and digladiations they have about him

*Anima Magica Abscondita:*

Away then with this Peripatetical Philosophy, this vain babbling, as St Paul justly styles it . . . the spirit of error—which is Aristotle’s—produceth naught but a multiplicity of notions . . . His followers refine the old notions but not the old creatures. And verily the mystery of their profession consists only in their terms. If their speculations were exposed to the world in a plain dress, their sense is so empty and shallow there is not any would acknowledge them for philosophers. In some discourses, I confess, they have Nature before them, but they go not the right way to apprehend her. They are still in chase but never overtake their game; for who is he amongst them whose knowledge is so entire and regular that he can justify his positions by practice.

*Euphrates* sounds very much like an unrestrained Francis Bacon attacking Aristotle:

I have often wondered that any sober spirits can think Aristotle’s philosophy perfect when it consists in mere words without any further effects; for of a truth the falsity and insufficiency of a mere notional knowledge is so apparent that no wise man will assert it . . . did not Aristotle’s science—if he had any—arise from particulars, or did it descend immediately from universals? . . . I have learned long ago, not from Aristotle but from Roger Bacon, that generals are of small value, nor fitting to be followed, save by reason of particulars. And this is evident in all practices and professions that conduce anything to the benefit of man.

Again, *Euphrates* sounds very much like Bacon:

Before his Fall man was a glorious creature, having received from God immortality and perfect knowledge; but in and after his Fall he exchanged immortality for death and knowledge for ignorance.

The distinction of God’s two books, nature and scripture, a recurring theme of Bacon’s, is also echoed in *Euphrates*:

Surely I am one that thinks very honourably of Nature, and if I avoid such disputes as these it is because I would not offend weak consciences. For there are a people who though they dare not think the majesty of God was diminished in that He made the world, yet they dare think the majesty of His Word is much vilified if it be applied to what He hath made—an opinion truly that carries in it a most dangerous blasphemy, namely, that God’s Word and God’s work should be such different things that the one must needs disgrace the other



### *Advancement of Learning:*

let no man upon a weak conceit of sobriety or an ill-applied moderation think or maintain that a man can search too far, or be too well studied in the book of God's word, or in the book of God's works, divinity or philosophy; but rather let men endeavour an endless progress or proficiencie in both; only let men beware that they apply both to charity, and not to swelling; to use, and not to ostentation; and again, that they do not unwisely mingle or confound these learnings together

One passage in *Aula Lucis* has several allusions to Bacon: his title and rumored royal descent ("noble Verulam"); his heraldic motto, *mediocria firma* (the middle way is sure), and his phrase for conveying secret knowledge in text, *traditio lampadis*:

Had their doctrine been such as the universities profess now their silence indeed had been a virtue; but their positions were not mere noise and notion. They were most deep experimental secrets, and those of infinite use and benefit. Such a tradition then as theirs may wear the style of the noble Verulam and is most justly called a Tradition of the Lamp . . . yet I cannot deny that some of them have rather buried the truth than dressed it. For my own part, I shall observe a middle way, neither too obscure nor too open, but such as may serve posterity and add some splendor to the science itself.

Philalethes aroused the antagonism of Cambridge professor Henry More, who initiated a pamphlet battle that took place in the early 1650s. Among other things, More attacked Philalethes for his lack of deference to Aristotle; *Man-Mouse Taken in a Trap* replied:

The second project is to be more learned and knowing than Aristotle, that great Light (as thou doest blindly all him) of these European parts for these many hundred years together: and not only so, but to be so far above him that I may be his master, that I may lug him and lash him, as Harry Moore's breech should be lash'd. Pish! here is a project indeed, to do all this is nothing.

A prefatory poem in *Man-Mouse* invokes Bacon:

Had Bacon liv'd in this unknowing Age,  
And seen Experience laugh'd at on the Stage,  
What Tempests would have risen in his Blood  
To side an Art, which Nature hath made Good?

...

Tell me in earnest, dost thou think 'tis fit  
To believe all that Aristotle writ?

Though he was blinded, yet experience can  
Sever the clouds, and make a clearer man

Surprisingly, Frederic Burnham overlooks these many other allusions to Bacon in the works of Eugenius Philalethes, when he writes of “attempt[s] to implicate Bacon in the Hermetic movement”:

More must have been shocked to discover that a mystic like Vaughan [Eugenius Philalethes] would invoke the sanction of an empiricist like Francis Bacon . . . After all, Bacon’s repudiation of illuminism, his distrust of imagination, his aversion to fanciful rhetoric, his rejection of philosophical sects, and his suspicion of theosophy were all precedents for the . . . revolt against enthusiasm. Consequently any attempt to associate Bacon with “magicians, soothsayers, Canters and Rosicrucians” was a gross abuse of the revered author.<sup>6</sup>

In *Valerius Terminus, or The Interpretation of Nature* (written around 1603) Bacon styled his annotator “Hermes Stella”; he later flattered James I as Hermes in a masque, exhorting him to acquire a “fit palace for a philosopher’s stone.” In 1614 Bacon’s friend Isaac Casaubon became famous for proving the *Corpus Hermeticum* dates from the Common Era. Bacon’s remarks on alchemy are equivocal; *Wisdom of the Ancients*:

All that we can say concerning that spring of gold is hardly able to defend us from the violence of the Chymists, if in this regard they set upon us, seeing they promise by that their elixir to effect golden mountains and the restoring of natural bodies, as it were, from the portal of hell. But concerning chemistry, and those perpetual suitors for that philosophical elixir, we know, certainly, that their theory is without grounds, and we suspect that their practice also is without certain reward. And therefore, omitting these, of this last part of the parable this is my opinion. I am induced to believe by many figures of the ancients that the conservation and restoration of natural bodies in some sort was not esteemed by them as a thing impossible to be attained, but as a thing abstruse and full of difficulties; and so they seem to intimate in this place, when they report that this one only sprig was found among infinite other trees in a huge and thick wood, which they feigned to be of gold, because gold is the badge of perpetuity, and to be artificially, as it were, inserted, because this effect is to be rather hoped for from art than from any medicine, or simple or natural means.

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<sup>6</sup> Burnham, Frederic B. “The More-Vaughan Controversy: The Revolt Against Philosophical Enthusiasm.” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 35, no. 1, 1974, pp. 33–49.

and to be artificially as it were inserted, because this effect is to be rather hoped for from Art, than from any Medicine, or simple, or natural means.

After Thomas Vaughan purportedly died from alchemical experiments in 1666, another series of tracts were issued under the name Eirenaeus Philalethes. Professor Steven Mathews has argued recently that Irenaeus of Lyon was a significant influence on Bacon; the first of these alchemy texts went out under “Eirenaeus Philoponus Philalethes,” which has significance for Bacon in the sense that (per Wikipedia):

John Philoponus broke from the Aristotelian–Neoplatonic tradition, questioning methodology and eventually leading to empiricism in the natural sciences. He was one of the first to propose a "theory of impetus" similar to the modern concept of inertia over Aristotelian dynamics . . . His posthumous condemnation [by the Church] limited the spread of his writing, but copies of his work, *The contra Aristotelem*, resurfaced in medieval Europe, through translations from Arabic.

I don't have the knowledge to pronounce on the importance of Irenaeus of Lyon, but he is known for his writings against the Gnostics, including the followers of Basilides and Valentinus. These Gnostic names were revived in Bacon's time as the alchemical writer “Basil Valentine”; again, I don't have the background to interpret this, but it might be relevant.

The famous *Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz* (Strasbourg, 1616), attributed by some to Bacon, contains a passage suggestive of the “four spiritual ways” scheme described by Gurjief, which was probably of Hindu or Indian origin:

By us doth the Bridegroom offer thee a choice between four ways, all of which, if thou dost not sink down in the way, can bring thee to his royal court. The first [fakir, physical] is short but dangerous, and one which will lead thee into rocky places, through which it will be scarcely possible to pass. The second [heart, *bhakti yoga*] is longer, and takes thee circuitously; it is plain and easy, if by the help of the Magnet, thou turnest neither to left nor right. The third [knowledge, *jnana yoga*] is that truly royal way which through various pleasures and pageants of our King, affords thee a joyful journey; but this so far has scarcely been allotted to one in a thousand. By the fourth shall no man reach the place, because it is a consuming way [i.e., by fire], practicable only for incorruptible bodies.

## Bacon's remarks on magic

I must here stipulate that magic, which has long been used in a bad sense, be again restored to its ancient and honourable meaning. For among the Persians magic was taken for a sublime wisdom, and the knowledge of the universal consents of things; and so the three kings who came from the east to worship Christ were called by the name of Magi. I however understand it as the science which applies the knowledge of hidden forms to the production of wonderful operations; and by uniting (as they say) actives with passives, displays the wonderful works of nature. For as for that natural magic which flutters about so many books, embracing certain credulous and superstitious traditions and observations concerning sympathies and antipathies, and hidden and specific properties, with experiments for the most part frivolous, and wonderful rather for the skill with which the thing is concealed and masked than for the thing itself; it will not be wrong to say that it is as far differing in truth of nature from such a knowledge as we require... But this popular and degenerate natural magic has the same kind of effect on men as some soporific drugs, which not only lull to sleep, but also during sleep instill gentle and pleasing dreams. For first it lays the understanding asleep by singing of specific properties and hidden virtues, sent as from heaven and only to be learned from the whispers of tradition; which makes men no longer alive and awake for the pursuit and inquiry of real causes, but to rest content with these slothful and credulous opinions; and then it insinuates innumerable fictions, pleasant to the mind, and such as one would most desire — like so many dreams. And it is worth while to note that in these sciences which hold too much of imagination and belief (such as that light Magic of which I now speak, Alchemy, Astrology, and others the like) that means and theory are ever more monstrous than the end and action at which they aim.