

Francis Bacon “born in the purple”



The significance of Francis Bacon being born in the purple and wearing purple from head to foot, which was only allowed legally to those of royal birth.

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“Being thus born in the purple”

The first biography of Francis Bacon (*Discours sur la Vie de M^{re}. Francois Bacon, Chancelier d’Angleterre*) was published in France in 1631, authored by Pierre Amboise, who had private access to some of Francis Bacon’s manuscripts. It was included as a preface to a Natural History by Francis Bacon (*Histoire Naturelle de M^{re}. Francois Bacon, Baron de Verulan, Vicomte de Saint Alban et Chancelier d’Angleterre*).

Amboise’s *Discourse on the Life of Mr. Francis Bacon, Chancellor of England*, contains some enigmatic details, such as the statement that Francis Bacon’s ancestors “left so many marks of their greatness in history that honour and dignity seem to have been at all times the spoil of his family”, and that he was “born in the purple and brought up with the expectation of a great career”:

M. Bacon was the son of a father who possessed no less virtue than he: his worth secured to him the honour of being so well-beloved by Queen Elizabeth that she gave him the position of Keeper of the Seals, and placed in his hands the most important affairs of her Kingdom...

M. Bacon was not only obliged to imitate the virtues of such an one, but also those of many others of his ancestors, who have left so many marks of their greatness in history that honour and dignity seem to have been at all times the spoil of his family. Certain it is that no one can reproach him with having added less than they to the splendour of his race.

Being thus born in the purple and brought up with the expectation of a great career, his father had him instructed in ‘bonnes lettres’ with such great and especial care...

And as he saw himself destined one day to hold in his hands the helm of the Kingdom...¹

Amboise compares Francis Bacon’s destiny and accomplishment to that of Sir Nicholas Bacon, and the reference to Francis Bacon seeing himself “destined one day to hold in his hands the helm of the Kingdom” refers to becoming Lord Keeper of the Great Seal and Lord Chancellor, like his father, Sir Nicholas Bacon—the Lord Keeper (or Chancellor) being equivalent to the helmsman who steers the ship, but who is nevertheless commanded by the captain (the Sovereign).

However, Amboise’s reference to Francis Bacon’s ancestors having “left so many marks of their greatness in history that honour and dignity seem to have been at all times the spoil of his family” is simply not true in terms of Sir Nicholas Bacon’s ancestors. Sir Nicholas came of

humble stock who left no marks of greatness in history, his father being Mr. Robert Bacon of Chislehurst, and his mother, Isabella, being the daughter of Mr. John Caye of Pakenham, Suffolk. The same can be said for Lady Anne Bacon’s ancestors, except perhaps for that of her father, Sir Anthony Cooke, who was one of the most learned men of his time and tutor to the boy king Edward VI, and whose family seat was Gidea Hall near Romford. But even this does not go anywhere near fulfilling that which Amboise states. In fact, Amboise’s description of the honour, dignity and greatness in history of many of Francis Bacon’s ancestors is more suited to a description of a prominent noble or royal line of descent.

Amboise then goes on to say that Francis Bacon was “born in the purple”. This is an idiom with specific meaning, referring to royal birth. By the time of Amboise’s writing, the idiom was beginning to be more loosely used to also include anyone born of a highly prominent, high-ranking parent. However, in England, according to a law passed by Act of Parliament in 1464, commoners were not permitted to wear purple, and Sir Nicholas Bacon and his wife Lady Anne (née Cooke) were commoners and not nobility, even though Sir Nicholas was addressed as “Lord Bacon” by virtue of the office he held as Lord Keeper of the Great Seal. The Queen had intended to raise Sir Nicholas to the aristocracy, but he died before she had carried out her intention.

Clad from top to toe in purple

Moreover, when Francis Bacon married on 10 May 1606, he was “clad from top to toe in purple”. This was something reserved by law to the royal family only. Nobles could wear a certain amount of purple in their clothing, the amount being dependant on rank, but they were not allowed to wear purple from top to toe—and the law was rigorously applied.

“Sir Francis Bacon was married yesterday to his young wench in Marylebone Chapel. He was clad from top to toe in purple, and hath made himself and his wife much store of fine raiments of cloth of silver and gold that it draws deep into her portion.”²

Francis Bacon repeated this again when he was appointed Lord Keeper of the Great Seal by King James I of England, VI of Scotland. Having appointed Bacon to this high office on 7 March 1617, King James soon after left his Lord Keeper to act as his temporary regent in England whilst he departed for Scotland for a six-month visit. In the King’s absence, Lord Bacon took his place in Chancery on 7 May 1616 with magnificent ceremony and dressed in a suit of purple satin, just as he was on his wedding day.³

In both instances King James never complained or brought Francis Bacon to account for this apparent breaking of the law and blatant portrayal of himself as being of royal blood. This begs the questions—why did the King and the authorities allow this? and what secret did King James know?

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Endnotes ►

Endnotes

¹ Pierre Amboise, ‘Discourse on the Life of M. Francis Bacon, Chancellor of England’, *Histoire Naturelle de Mre. François Bacon* (1631).

² Letter from Dudley Carlton to John Chamberlain, published in Mrs Everett Green’s *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series: James I* (published under the direction of the Master of the Rolls), p.307. James Spedding, *The Letters and the Life of Francis Bacon*, Vol.3, ch.VIII, 2.

³ Letter from G. Gerrard to Sir D. Carlton, 9 May 1617. *Calendar of State Papers: Domestic Series: James I*, vol. xcii, no.15.