

The Royal Knight, Sir Francis Bacon



John Davies of Hereford's sonnet saluting Francis Bacon as a royal knight and thrice-great lawyer, philosopher and poet, and confirmed by Thomas Campion.

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The ascription “your sovereign Frauncis” on the cover of the Northumberland Manuscript fits well with a sonnet addressed to “the royall, ingenious, and all-learned Knight, Sir Francis Bacon,” penned by John Davies of Hereford and published in *The Scourge of Folly* c.1610.

Besides addressing Sir Francis Bacon as a “royal Knight”, John Davies’ sonnet describes Bacon as both a lawyer and a poet, who used the company of his Muse (Pallas Athena) “for sport twixt grave affairs”: -

To the Royall Ingenious and All-learned Knight, Sir Francis Bacon.

Thy bounty and the beauty of thy witt
Compris’d in lists of Law and learned Arts,
Each making thee for great Employment fitt,
Which now thou hast (though short of thy deserts,)
Compells my pen to let fall shining Inke
And to bedew the Baies that deck thy Front,
And to thy Health in Helicon to drinke,
As to her Bellamour the Muse is wont,
For thou dost her embosom; and dost use
Her company for sport twixt grave affaires:
So utter’st Law the livelier through thy Muse.
And for that all thy Notes are sweetest Aires;
My Muse thus notes thy worth in ev’ry line,
With ynke which thus she sugars; so, to shine.¹

John Davies of Hereford, poet, writing-master and an instructor of Prince Henry at the Court of King James I, not only identifies Francis Bacon as a lawyer but also as a poet and philosopher (“the learned Arts”). “Shining ink” is a term used for poetic lines (i.e. words and sentences of light), and “Baies” refers to the crown of bay leaves bestowed on famous poets and philosophers, symbolising their illumination. “Helicon” is the name of the mountain (Mount Helicon) where the Hippocrene stream was located—the stream that Pegasus caused to burst forth from the mountainside when his hoof struck it, and in which the Muses were born. Mount Helicon and the Hippocrene spring were considered to be a source of poetic inspiration.

Francis Bacon’s Muse was Pallas Athena; he was her “Bellamour” (‘Beloved’). Athena is the goddess of poetry, philosophy and the arts, whom Bacon did “embosom”. Her seat or throne is on Mount Parnassus, the twin mountain to Mount Helicon, both being associated with the Muses. Whereas the Muses were born on Mount Helicon, their home was said to be on Mount Parnassus, from which flows the Castalian spring, another source of poetic inspiration.² Athena’s partner is Apollo, both being enthroned on double-peaked Parnassus. Apollo is

known as the Daystar and Leader of the Muses, Athena as the Tenth Muse, the Muse of Muses. In various tributes to Francis Bacon, he is not only acclaimed as being inspired by Apollo and Athena but also likened to them both.³

In his sonnet, Davies vividly contrasts the two lives of Bacon, one as a lawyer dealing with grave affairs and the other as a poet who sports with his Muse. One life is public, the other secret; one is serious, the other fun. Bacon always contended that he did not much enjoy the practice of law, whereas he took great pleasure in his literary work and the “fountains of Parnassus”, for which he felt he was born. Because of this, Davies notes that all Bacon’s “Notes are sweetest aires”. Sweetness, and sugar, were terms used to describe poetic verse.

In a clever turn of phrase with double meaning, Davies refers to the bays as decking Bacon’s “Front”. ‘Deck’ means ‘cover’ or ‘adorn’, and ‘Front’ can refer to ‘face’ as well as ‘forehead’. Hence Davies appears to be giving a twofold meaning: firstly, that bays adorn Bacon’s forehead and, secondly, that they cover his face—the latter implying a concealed poet, which is something that Bacon said he was and which others proclaimed him to be.

Davies included this eulogic epigram addressed to Bacon in his *Scourge of Folly* (1610) together with a satirical epigram addressed to “Mr. Will Shake-speare”, referring to “Shakespeare” as “our English Terence”—Terence being a Roman slave who was famous for the comedies he was supposed to have written, but in fact was alleged to have been a mask for the writings of great men such as the Roman senators Scipio the younger and Laelius, who wished to keep their authorship concealed.

Thomas Campion, a physician and composer well known for his exquisite songs and lyrics, is another poet who wrote a poem praising Francis Bacon’s combination of philosophy and law with the poetry and arts of the Muses. Addressing Bacon when he was Lord Chancellor, Campion also acclaimed how firmly Bacon’s love “stands by those once admitted to it”.

To the Most High Chancellor of all England, FR. BA.

How great thou stand’st before us, whether the thorny volumes of the Law
Or the Academy, or the sweet Muses call thee, O Bacon!
How thy prudence rules over great affairs!
And thy whole tongue is moist with celestial nectar!
How well combinest thou merry wit with silent gravity!
How firmly thy love stands by those once admitted to it.⁴

Notably, Campion uses the Hermetic trilogy of the Shakespeare Monument in Holy Trinity Church, Stratford-upon-Avon, to describe Bacon: namely, the thorny volume of the law and silent gravity of the judge (Nestor); the Academy and steadfast love of the philosopher (Socrates); and the sweet Muses and merry wit of the poet (Virgil).

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¹ John Davies of Hereford, *Epigrams to Worthy Persons* (c.1610).

² Mount Parnassus and the Castalian spring were sacred to the Muses. The spring issued from between two great cliffs above the sacred site of Delphi, on the southern slopes of the mountain. The cliffs were known as the Phaedriades ("the shining ones"). In classical times, the Castalian waters were introduced into a square stone basin, where they were retained for the use of the Pythia and the priests of Apollo.

³ In *The Great Assizes Holden in Parnassus* (1645), attributed to the poet George Withers, Francis Bacon is portrayed as the Chancellor of Parnassus, leader of the poets. William Shakespeare is declared to be a mimic who pretends to be a poet.

⁴ Thomas Campion, *Epigrammatum*. Lib II (1619). Translated from the Latin.

Ad Ampliss. Totius Angliæ Cancellarium.

FR. BA.

Quantus ades, seu te spinosa Volumina juris

Seu schola, seu dolcis Musa (Bacone) vocat!

Quam super ingenti tua re Prudentia regnat!

Et tota æthereo nectare lingua madens!

Quam bene cum tacita nectis gravitate lepores!

Quam semel admissis stat tuus almus amor.