

i n t e r p r e t a t i o n

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Spring 1989

Volume 16 Number 3

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Bacon's Myth of Orpheus

Power as a Goal of Science in *Of the Wisdom of the Ancients*

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Most attempts to understand the historical origins of the modern concept of mastery of nature have devoted at least some attention to the thought of Francis Bacon. Despite this, the grounds of Bacon's own turn to power rather than truth as the primary goal of science remain obscure, and have been described in diverse and mutually contradictory ways. Here, it is argued that the evidence provided on this question by one of Bacon's earlier works, *Of the Wisdom of the Ancients*, has been largely neglected. This neglect is traced to misunderstanding of the literary character of the book and a resulting failure to take it seriously as a deeply considered expression of Bacon's own philosophical views. Through a close analysis of Bacon's treatment of the classical myth which he chose as a symbol of "philosophy personified," and a juxtaposition of this text with other key Baconian passages and themes, it is argued that Bacon's turn to power may in part be traced to his desire for a kind of philosophy which might be able to rule religion, rather than being ruled by it.

ON THE LITERARY CHARACTER OF *WISDOM OF THE ANCIENTS*

Almost forty years ago, Fulton H. Anderson called attention to the unjustified neglect of *De Sapientia Veterum* as a source for understanding Bacon's philosophy (*Philosophy of Francis Bacon*, Chicago, 1948, p. 57). Despite some valuable accounts of the historical background of the book, it is fair to say that this neglect has not been remedied by more recent studies. My effort to do so here has two primary intentions. The first is to suggest that misunderstanding of the literary character of the work is a major reason why it has not been studied more seriously as a work of philosophy. The second is to indicate the lines along which a comprehensive interpretation might proceed, by offering an analysis of Bacon's interpretation of the myth of Orpheus ("Orpheus; or Philosophy," the eleventh chapter of *Wisdom of the Ancients*) and its implications for the understanding of Bacon's philosophy as a whole. The ultimate purpose of such a study is to clarify the prior motives which either produced or reinforced the emergence of power as the primary goal of Baconian science.

The question of the literary character of *Wisdom of the Ancients* has two

aspects: the more general problem of the manner in which Bacon wrote his books, and the specific problem of his intentions in writing *Wisdom of the Ancients* itself (in particular, the question of how seriously Bacon took his claim to have recovered a lost “ancient wisdom” concealed in classical mythology). The general problem can best be approached by recalling that James Spedding, the principal shaper of the great and still standard nineteenth-century edition of Bacon’s works, noted the many puzzling passages in Bacon’s writings which seemed to imply that Bacon had a teaching which he kept secret in some sense or manner (J. Spedding, R. L. Ellis, and D. D. Heath, *The Works of Francis Bacon*, 7 vols. London: Longmans, 1857–1870, Vol. 1, pp. 107–113). Unless otherwise noted, all references to Bacon’s writings will be to this edition. Brief parenthetical text references are to this edition and cited by volume and page numbers alone; for example, the reference just made would be cited in the text as [1:107–113]. Spedding concentrated on the question of whether these remarks meant that Bacon had reserved for private communication views which he entirely refrained from expressing in his published writings, even indirectly. In viewing the problem in these terms, he gave insufficient attention to Bacon’s suggestions that in his writings he sought to combine a direct appeal to the reader of ordinary abilities, dominated by received opinions, with indirect indications of a further teaching addressed to “the deeper intellect” (6:690).

Bacon in fact makes several direct and open references to the possibility of an “acroamatic or enigmatical method” of writing (4:450), one which would transmit new discoveries in a way which would “above all, [select] to itself the legitimate reader” (7:367). Here, it suffices to quote two of the more striking among these references:

The intention of [this acroamatic or enigmatical method] seems to be by obscurity of delivery to exclude the vulgar from the secrets of knowledges, and to admit those only who have either received the interpretations of the enigmas through the hands of the teachers, or have wits of such sharpness and discernment as can pierce the veil (4:450).

The discretion anciently observed . . . of publishing in a manner whereby it shall not be to the taste nor capacity of all, but shall as it were single 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 (3:248).

These and many other statements about the general problem of indirect communication suggest that Bacon expected that at least a few of his readers would do a certain amount of reading between the lines (On the general problem see *Works*, 3:255, 363; 4:42, 53, 311, 371; 5:31; 6:377–378, 387–389, 403–404, 429–431, 456, 701–702). Among Bacon’s works, few seem better suited to such an approach than does *Wisdom of the Ancients*. The letters of dedication and the preface to the book indicate that Bacon considered it an important and, above all, a philosophical work (6:689, 691, 699). Yet from the perspective of

Bacon's philosophy as a whole, the very existence of *Wisdom of the Ancients* would seem to be strange and paradoxical, a flat contradiction of Bacon's fundamental animating principle that "new discoveries must be sought from the light of nature, not fetched back out of the darkness of antiquity" (4:109), from things and not from texts and particularly not from old texts. Moreover, the specific claims on which the book seems to rest have a fantastic character difficult to reconcile with Bacon's customary sobriety and matter-of-factness: that classical mythology is an allegorical or esoteric presentation of a comprehensive philosophical or scientific teaching which preceded Greek science and was vastly superior to it, and that Bacon has now decoded these allegorical messages so as to reveal for the first time the consciously intended meaning of their putative authors.

Much discussion of *Wisdom of the Ancients* has focused on the question of whether or not Bacon really believed this claim that classical mythology was a consciously devised allegorical presentation of "ancient wisdom."¹ I believe that the overall interpretive claim he makes in the book is radically insincere, and his belief in the real existence of such "ancient wisdom" wholly and deliberately feigned. The evidence for this, which seems to me conclusive, is of two kinds, one external to the work itself, the other derived from Bacon's preface to it.

The external evidence consists of clear and unequivocal statements by Bacon, written both prior to and following publication of *Wisdom of the Ancients*, to the effect that any such work would properly be regarded as a "fiction" or "imposture":

[Bacon] knew well that, if he chose to act with less than absolute sincerity, it would not be difficult to convince men that among the sages of antiquity, long before the Greeks, a Science of Nature had flourished, of much more potency than theirs and sunk in deeper oblivion. He knew well what solemnity it would add to new discoveries to connect them with remote antiquity in the same way as self-made men invest themselves from the dubious traditions of the genealogists with the glory of some ancient stock. But Bacon was resolved to rely on the evidence of facts and avoid any sort of imposture (Farrington, pp. 86–87. Bacon is writing of himself in the third person here).

This seems to be a perfectly clear admission before the fact of the fundamental insincerity of Bacon's interpretive claim in *Wisdom*. The most serious and detailed attempt to clear Bacon's name of the imputation of deliberate deception is that made by Paolo Rossi, who argues that shortly after writing the above passage Bacon changed his mind and decided that in fact the allegorical hypothesis was correct. Rossi presents a complicated account of the alleged stages in the evolution of Bacon's attitude towards classical myth, an evolution which is supposed to have culminated in the position taken in *Wisdom of the Ancients* (Rossi, pp. 81–96; see in particular the schematic summary of Rossi's

view on p. 95). My objection to this theory is that it requires us to posit even more changes of mind, taking place over a longer period of time, than Prof. Rossi describes. Rossi's account speaks of four reversals in Bacon's attitude towards myth in six years, and treats the position taken in *Wisdom of the Ancients* (published in 1609) as final. But it seems that by the time Bacon published *The New Organon* in 1620, he had again changed his mind on this subject, returning to his original skepticism about the philosophical content of myth and restating it in language very similar to that just cited:

And I know that if I had chosen to deal less sincerely, I might easily have found authority for my suggestions by referring them to the old times before the Greeks . . . and so gained for them both support and honor, as men of no family devise for themselves by the good help of genealogies the nobility of a descent from some ancient stock. But for my part, relying on the evidence and truth of things, I reject all forms of fiction and imposture (4:108).

Moreover, it would appear that a few years later (in 1623) Bacon returned to the belief in the real existence of "ancient wisdom," for he included revised versions of three of the myths examined in *Wisdom of the Ancients* in the expanded Latin version of *The Advancement of Learning* (4:315–335). In short, taking Rossi's theory seriously requires us to believe that from middle age almost to the time of his death Bacon kept flip-flopping back and forth on this question, now sincerely believing in the existence of an ancient wisdom concealed in mythology, now denouncing any such assertion as an act of conscious fraud. Rather than attempting to save the theory by adding to it still more epicycles upon change-of-mind epicycles, it seems to me simpler, far more plausible, and more consistent with Bacon's obvious stature as a thinker to assume that he always meant what he said in speaking of the pretended existence of ancient wisdom as primarily a means of adding prestige to his own thoughts through a conscious deception, and that he wrote *Wisdom of the Ancients* intending precisely that deception of many of his readers. The primary motive behind the unconvincing and plainly ad hoc hypothesis that Bacon kept jumping from one position to its opposite and then back again seems to be that most modern scholars find the possibility of such authorial insincerity distasteful. The problem with allowing such understandable reactions to govern the interpretation of Bacon's writings is that he himself did not regard this kind of dissembling as fundamentally and invariably objectionable. As he put it in the *Essays*, in great and rare matters—and surely he regarded his proposed reform of human knowledge and the human estate as such?—lying can, on occasion, be justified (6:389).

The internal evidence that Bacon never seriously believed that classical mythology was philosophical allegory is necessarily more ambiguous than that just cited, but also seems convincing. It should be plain to any reader not implacably opposed to the very possibility of radical authorial irony or insincerity that

Bacon's preface attaches no crucial importance to the claim that he is recovering a lost ancient science or philosophy, and that this claim is undermined by a number of things which he himself says. Moreover, a careful reading of the preface reveals a plausible Baconian motive for the pretense in question, one completely consistent with that implied in the writings referred to earlier. Bacon tells us that it is an old and frequent practice to allegorize myth in such a manner as "to gain the sanction and reverence of antiquity" for one's own doctrines (6:695). It is all too easy to read whatever one pleases into classical myths: "Not but that I know very well what pliant stuff fable is made of, how freely it will follow any way you please to draw it, and how easily with a little dexterity and discourse of wit meanings which it was never meant to bear may be plausibly put upon it" (6:695).

Bacon then offers four reasons to proceed with the allegorical enterprise despite these forcefully stated objections to its fundamental validity. The first argument is religious: to declare valid myth interpretation impossible would be "boldness savoring of profanity; seeing that religion delights in such veils and shadows, and to take them away would be almost to interdict all communion between divinity and humanity" (6:696). It is difficult to see the relevance of this argument, since the fables examined in *Wisdom* are neither biblical nor (by Bacon's own hypothesis) communications from any divine being, but rather are supposed to be allegories consciously devised by wise men who sought to illuminate "the difficulties of life and the secrets of science" (6:689–690); denial of the allegorical hypothesis in this particular case cannot in any sense be said to "interdict all communion between divinity and humanity."

The second reason is that "some" or "no small number" of the myths can be so convincingly explicated as to make their allegorical character manifest and indisputable (6:696). But the specific examples of such allegedly indisputable interpretations which Bacon goes on to cite are hardly so convincing as to outweigh the fundamentally question-begging character of this argument, particularly in light of the admission that "a little dexterity and discourse of wit" suffice to give a plausible air even to quite unjustified allegorical interpretations. Bacon's argument amounts to nothing more than the assertion that because myth can plausibly be read *as though* it were philosophical allegory, it must *be* philosophical allegory, which is precisely the point in dispute.

The third reason given for believing that myths "contain a hidden and involved meaning" is that "some of them are so absurd and stupid upon the face of the narrative taken by itself, that they may be said to give notice from afar and cry out that there is a parable below" (6:697). The argument that absurdity and stupidity are reliable signs of the presence of philosophical and scientific wisdom requires no comment.

The fourth reason, which Bacon declares to be the one which he finds most convincing, is that the classical myths clearly derive from an age earlier than that of Homer and Hesiod, in whose work they first appear. Bacon revealingly

remarks that had the myths been shown to be contemporaneous with Homer and Hesiod, he “should not have thought of looking for anything great or lofty from such a source” (6:697). That is, the first three reasons given for adopting the allegorical hypothesis are implicitly conceded to be unconvincing taken by themselves; moreover, Bacon’s remark tends to discredit the fundamental principle of reverence for antiquity on which *Wisdom of the Ancients* itself is ostensibly based.

Having offered these at best inconclusive and at worst obtrusively feeble arguments for believing that mythology is systematic philosophical allegory, Bacon seems to shift his ground rather dramatically; in doing so he both admits that the allegorical hypothesis is not absolutely crucial to his book and quietly hints at his reason for writing as though it were crucial. He addresses a hypothetical reader unconvinced by the previous arguments, who still believes “that the allegorical meaning of the fable was in no case original and genuine, but that always the fable was first and the allegory put in after” (6:698). Bacon declares that he “will not press that point,” but will proceed “in another manner upon a fresh ground” (6:698).

This “fresh ground” consists of the following argument. Let us concede that no allegorical or hidden meaning was intended by the authors of classical myths. There nevertheless remains another use for such fables (however they were devised), one “grave and sober, and free from all vanity; of prime use to the sciences, and sometimes indispensable: I mean the employment of parables as a method of teaching, whereby inventions that are new and abstruse and remote from vulgar opinions may find an easier passage to the understanding” (6:698, emphasis added). In ancient times when reason was new and strange and the possession of few, myths may have been used “not as a device for shadowing and concealing the meaning, but as a method of making it understood. And even now if anyone wish to let new light on any subject into men’s minds, and that without offence or harshness, he must still go the same way and call in the aid of similitudes” (6:698, emphases added).

Bacon’s conclusion clearly indicates that the value of his book is not crucially dependent on the truth of the allegorical hypothesis:

Upon the whole I conclude with this: the wisdom of the primitive ages was either great or lucky; great, if they knew what they were doing and invented the figure to shadow the meaning; lucky, if without meaning or intending it they fell upon matter which gives occasion to such worthy contemplations. . . . I shall be throwing light either upon antiquity or upon nature itself. . . . Here it will be found . . . that though the subjects be old, yet the matter is new (6:698, emphasis added).

When we read these statements in the context of the external evidence of insincerity earlier cited, and recall the profound rejection of antiquity which animates Bacon’s philosophy as a whole, I think we may reasonably conclude that *Of the Wisdom of the Ancients* was a deliberate and self-conscious attempt to

present Bacon's own thoughts in the guise of a feigned recovery of a lost ancient wisdom. When one adds to this evidence Bacon's own statement that we ought to regard the men of his own time as the true "ancients," since as the later arrivals they are in a position to benefit from all the previously made discoveries and prior historical experience of mankind (4:82), one wonders whether the very title of the book is not an example of Baconian wordplay. On the surface, "wisdom of the ancients" refers to the wisdom of men who lived long ago; beneath the surface, it refers to the wisdom of the "true" ancients; that is, the moderns!

In *Wisdom of the Ancients* Bacon sought to take advantage of the fact that "primeval antiquity [was] an object of the highest veneration" (6:689) and to "add solemnity to new discoveries" by feigning them to have been made by the ancients. In doing so, he sought an appealing, indirect, and inoffensive way to present his own views, as well as a means of obscuring to some extent the fact that they were his (the proclaimed role of interpreter of the thoughts of others serving as an obvious defense of one's own reputation and security in the event that the views presented in such a manner do give offense or cause one's own orthodoxy to fall under suspicion). That there might have been solid prudential as well as pedagogical and propagandistic reasons for proceeding in this way will, I hope, become apparent in the course of my attempt to recover Bacon's thought from his interpretation of the Orphic myth.

"ORPHEUS; OR PHILOSOPHY"

The first thing to note about Bacon's interpretation of the myth of Orpheus is that he chose the story of an attempt to restore a dead human being to life as his symbol of natural philosophy. "For natural philosophy proposes to itself, as its noblest work of all, nothing less than the restitution and renovation of things corruptible, and (what is indeed the same thing in a lower degree) the conservation of bodies in the state in which they are, and the retardation of dissolution and putrefaction" (6:721). This choice was neither casual nor capricious. The key to Bacon's understanding of human psychology, and the psychology of the philosopher in particular, is his unequivocal statement in *The Advancement of Learning* that "immortality or continuance" is "that whereunto man's nature doth most aspire" (3:318). The central theme of his interpretation of the Orphic myth is the role played in the philosophic life by various forms of the aspiration to immortality, and his most astonishing suggestion, intimated rather than clearly stated for obvious prudential reasons, is that the original form which this takes is the desire for bodily immortality. This understanding of the ultimate goal of natural philosophy pervades Bacon's work from beginning to end. In an early work which he chose to leave unpublished, he spoke of "the

true end of knowledge” as “the discovery of all operations and possibilities of operations, from immortality (if it were possible) to the meanest mechanical practice” (3:222); toward the end of his life (fittingly enough) he devoted an entire book (*The History of Life and Death*) to the problems of longevity, health, and mortality. (For some other passages which indicate the intensity and pervasiveness of Bacon’s concern with these matters, see *Works*, 3:157, 158, 159, 160, 167; 4:85–86, 383–385, 390–391, 418; 6:749,761).

“Immortality (if it were possible) . . . ” Did Bacon in fact think that it *was* possible? Given the then-existing religious constraints on any direct and unqualified positing of bodily immortality as the supreme goal of science, it is difficult and perhaps impossible to determine exactly how far he went in his innermost thoughts; difficult too to distinguish convincingly between hopes seriously entertained and illusions which he thought it useful to encourage in an indirect and tacit manner as part of an effort to win the maximum possible support for Baconian science (*Works*, 4:85–86, 90–102; 6:411). If in fact the usually sober and clear-sighted Bacon ever cherished such fantastic dreams (which one naturally hesitates to believe despite the undeniable textual evidence), it seems clear that he regarded their fulfillment as possible only in the very distant future: in his imaginary kingdom of Bensalem, a society in which Baconian science is supposed to have been in existence for about nineteen hundred years, the scientists of Salomon’s House seem to have made only limited progress in overcoming age and reviving the dead (*Works*, 3:149, 159).

About all that can be said with confidence is that Bacon’s writings contain a surprising number of direct, and an even greater number of indirect, allusions to the possibility of using scientific medicine to revive the dead, prolong life, and preserve health. These seem to be hinting at something which goes considerably beyond an ordinary concern with maintaining health and living out one’s three-score years and ten. Some of his formulations (e.g., “immortality or continuance”) suggest a blurring of the distinction between the indefinite prolongation of life and immortality, or seem to imply that perhaps the former might progress to such an extent as to make it all but indistinguishable from the latter (*The Historie of Life and Death*, New York, 1977, pp. 1–7). To the extent that it was a sincere hope rather than an illusion deliberately fostered in the interest of mobilizing all possible human energies for scientific progress, immortality would appear in Bacon’s thought as a kind of extreme or asymptotic possibility arising from the juxtaposition of two prior beliefs which are indisputably Baconian: that scientific medicine might prolong life and preserve health, and that the science on which such medicine would be based might itself be capable of indefinite or infinite progress in the mastery of nature. But this only restates the interpretive problem in an altered form, since it is notoriously difficult to say exactly how far Bacon thought “the mastery of nature” might ultimately go.

Whatever his final and perhaps unrecoverable thoughts on this matter, it is clear that as a propagandist attempting to win support for science Bacon sought

to insinuate the idea that science might make possible some indefinite but very significant increase in human longevity, and that he was in this as in other respects far less concerned to indicate limits on any such enterprise than to deny them, remove them, or obscure their existence. An additional and perhaps decisive motive for both the substantive concern with “immortality or continuance” and the propagandistic efforts to mobilize human energies for the mastery of nature by implying that such mastery might have mastery of mortality as its logical terminus will appear after we have examined the implications of “Orpheus” for Bacon’s understanding of the relation between philosophy or science and religion.

It was clear to Bacon that for the foreseeable future (and perhaps forever) the only form of “immortality” realistically available to the best human beings was that which Orpheus sought after his failure to rescue Eurydice: the diluted and derivative “immortality” produced by lasting fame. Frustrated in the direct attempt to master human mortality, Orpheus turned to charming animals, trees, and stones. Following an established tradition of Renaissance mythography, Bacon interprets this part of the fable as a symbol of “moral and civil philosophy,” which he presents as an effort by the philosopher to win fame by using “persuasion and eloquence to insinuate into men’s minds the love of virtue and equity and peace” (6:722). In doing this, the philosopher is “seeking immortality by merit and renown” (6:722), or the fame which is the reward of those who order human communities and hence assure most human beings of the only kind of “immortality” to which they can aspire, that achieved through their children (a third and still more derivative form of “immortality or continuance”). The philosopher’s motive in doing this is not pity for mankind, still less any sort of Christian charity, but is rather a modified form of his original concern with overcoming mortality. Bacon here provides one among a number of similar clues to his understanding of his own motives as a philosopher.²

In addition, Bacon hints at a remarkable understanding of the nature of “philosophy moral and civil” and its relation to natural philosophy. The immediate and public purpose of political philosophy is the production of order and peace, not the promulgation of theoretical truth. So far it is from revealing to men the truth about their own natures that its success depends rather on producing a kind of forgetting of human nature:

[B]y the same sweetness of his song and lyre he drew to him all kinds of wild beasts, *in such manner that putting off their several natures, forgetting all their quarrels and ferocity* . . . they all stood about him gently and sociably, as in a theatre, listening only to the concords of his lyre. . . . [T]he charm being broken that had been the bond of that order and good fellowship, confusion began again; *the beasts returned each to his several nature* and preyed one upon the other as before . . . (6:721; emphases added).

Moreover, Bacon’s interpretation of the fable’s sequence of events (first nat-

ural philosophy, then its failure, then moral philosophy) clearly implies that “philosophy moral and civil” is a derivative and secondary enterprise, in the sense that its character depends on the amount of power over nature achieved by the existing natural philosophy. (Compare *Works*, 4:114: the enormous differences between the way of life of civilized Europeans and that of savages is entirely due to different levels of development of “the arts.”) In *The New Organon*, in brief remarks that are otherwise almost wholly unexplicated by the rest of the Baconian corpus (and which moreover flatly contradict his seeming assurances that scientific and technological innovation can be combined with political and religious conservatism). Bacon states that his new natural science or new “scientific method” will also produce a new “ethics, and politics” (4:112). “Orpheus” suggests that among other things Bacon meant to say by this that a science which had overcome mortality (or which could plausibly suggest to mankind that it was making steady progress toward this goal) might turn to human affairs in a spirit very different from the “sorrowful mood” characteristic of ancient moral and political philosophy. Bacon indicated the fundamental character of that spirit when he entitled his utopian work “New Atlantis”; Bensalem is a “new” Atlantis because Salomon’s House embodies a modified and redirected form of that hubristic pride and immoderate aspiration to rule both nature and man found in the “old” Atlantis portrayed in Plato’s *Timaeus* and *Critias*. (See J. W. Weinberger, “Science and Rule in Bacon’s Utopia: An Introduction to the Reading of the *New Atlantis*,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 70 (1976), p. 879.)

This astonishing conception of philosophy and the psychology of the philosopher seems, in addition, to have a definite historical dimension or referent which conveys Bacon’s understanding of what he took to be the single greatest historical distortion of the true nature and function of philosophy, that which took place in the thought of Plato and Aristotle. Bacon emphasizes the significance of the temporal sequence of events in the Orphic myth: natural philosophy is Orpheus’ initial concern, and his failure at this enterprise produces the subsequent “turn to human affairs” carried out in a “sorrowful mood.” “And this application of philosophy to civil affairs is *properly represented, and according to the true order of things*, as subsequent to the diligent trial and final frustration of the experiment of restoring the dead body to life” (6:722: emphasis added). This “turn” from natural philosophy to ethics and politics reminds one of the single most famous such turning, that of Socrates as portrayed by Plato, an event in the history of Western philosophy which Bacon (following Cicero) elsewhere describes in terms which suggest he had it in mind when interpreting the story of Orpheus. “[W]hen Socrates had drawn down philosophy from heaven to earth, moral philosophy became more fashionable than ever, and diverted the minds of men from the philosophy of nature” (4:78). The pre-Socratic philosophers had conducted serious inquiries into nature, but beginning with Plato this enterprise had been undermined and corrupted by po-

litical and theological ambitions and by the desire for literary fame (Farrington, pp. 64, 83, 110–116). “Neither is my meaning, as was spoken of Socrates, to call philosophy down from heaven to converse upon the earth; that is, to leave natural philosophy aside, and to apply knowledge only to manners and policy” (3:294). The shift of emphasis effected by the Platonic Socrates, so fateful for so much of subsequent philosophy, is portrayed in “Orpheus” as a consequence of the failure of pre-Socratic natural philosophy to achieve its proper goal (the one which was “noblest,” first in time, and most deeply rooted in human nature). It was a derivative effort by the philosopher to win fame for himself by benevolently mastering other men after the original attempt to master nature had failed.

The suggestion that Bacon's version of the Orphic myth has a precise historical referent is supported by his interpretation of the destruction of Orpheus and the political order which he created, a destruction said to have been accomplished by “certain Thracian women, under the stimulation and excitement of Bacchus” (6:721). It would appear that philosophy's ordering of human communities is not particularly durable; some force works to undermine that order. In fact, “Orpheus” contains a Delphic criticism of both the dominant tradition in ancient philosophy (the Socratic tradition, defined broadly enough to include such figures as Aristotle and Cicero) and the Christian religion which outconverted, outorganized, outlasted, absorbed, and came to dominate it. To make this at first sight rather fantastic claim plausible, we must pay close attention to the details of Bacon's interpretation of the fable of Bacchus or Dionysus as well as that of Orpheus.

I note first that moral and civil philosophy's ordering of human society, as Bacon presents it in “Orpheus,” seems to make no use of religion as a means of producing social peace; despite the fact that Bacon elsewhere calls religion “the chief band of human society” (6:381), here philosophy employs rhetoric (“persuasion and eloquence”) to instill affection toward the moral virtues (“virtue and equity and peace”) (6:722). The treatment of the Orphic myth in *The Advancement of Learning*, by contrast, does mention the role of religion in this regard; there, the story of Orpheus is said to teach that civil peace depends on men giving ear “to precepts, to laws, to religion, sweetly touched with eloquence and persuasion of books, of sermons, of harangues . . .” (3:302). That is to say, in *Wisdom of the Ancients* Bacon seems to eliminate the religious and theological traits usually associated with Orpheus in the Renaissance mythographical tradition on which Bacon in part relied, traits which he himself refers to in other works. (On the relative merits of philosophy and faith as sources of social peace, consider the essay “Of Superstition” [6:415–416]).

Second, Bacon recounts that Orpheus was torn to pieces by “Thracian women under the stimulation and excitement of Bacchus,” but offers no specific interpretation of this particular detail of the myth. In his interpretation of the destruction of the Orphic order, he says only that “after kingdoms and common-

wealths have flourished for a time, there arise perturbations and seditions and wars; amid the uproars of which . . . the laws are put to silence . . . ” (6:722). But what produces such disturbances in the first place? Do the Thracian women under the influence of Bacchus represent anything more specific and historically concrete than some assumed general tendency of order periodically to lapse into disorder? In “Orpheus” itself, Bacon offers no suggestion as to what the women under the influence of Bacchus might represent, but if we accept his own ostensible interpretive principle in *Wisdom of the Ancients* (namely, that a philosophical allegory contains no doctrinally insignificant details) then certain remarks which he makes in other chapters, and in the expanded version of the Dionysus fable in the *De Augmentis Scientiarum*, are illuminating.

In his interpretation of the myth of Dionysus in *Wisdom* (6:740–743), we find that among other traits Bacchus was “the inventor and founder of sacred rites and ceremonies; yet such as were fanatical and full of corruption, and cruel besides” (6:741). In the enlarged version of the same fable in the *De Augmentis*, Bacon indicates that he is not thinking solely of pagan religion here, for he says that the savagery of Bacchus’ rites shows that “the pollutions of heretics are worse than the Bacchanalian orgies of the heathen” (4:335). (On the connection between Christianity and fanatical cruelty, see *Works*, 6:381, 383–384, 470–471, 732–733.) “Dionysus” reveals that Orpheus was not the only one victimized by these rites; Bacon notes that “it was by women excited to phrensy in [Bacchus’] orgies that two illustrious persons, Pentheus and Orpheus, are said to have been torn to pieces . . . ” (6:741). If we attempt to explore this reference to Pentheus, we find that the chapter “Actaeon and Pentheus,” which immediately precedes “Orpheus” in *Wisdom of the Ancients*, presents Pentheus as a symbol of those who aspire to grasp the secrets of divinity by means of human reason (6:719–720). In “Dionysus,” however, Pentheus becomes a symbol of those who calmly and rationally inquire into the true nature of violent and unruly passions, and Bacon makes all but explicit the implied identification of religion or the corruption of religion with unreasoning passion: “Nor is it wonderful that superstitious rites are attributed to Bacchus, since every insane passion grows rank in depraved religions. . . . [T]hat circumstance of the tearing of Pentheus and Orpheus has an evident allegorical meaning; since curious inquisition [Pentheus] and salutary and free admonition [Orpheus] are alike hateful and intolerable to an overpowering passion” (6:743). The suggestion which emerges from bringing together these hints and remarks seems to be that the peace and order which philosophy, employing rhetoric, is capable of bringing to human societies is periodically destroyed by the eruption of depraved passions expressing themselves through religious frenzy or enthusiasm. (On the closely related and perhaps in the last analysis identical topic of the rivalry between “learning” and “superstition” for control of the human mind, compare *Works*, 3:316–317 with *Works*, 6:415–416.)

If I am correct in suggesting that Orpheus the moral and political philoso-

pher stands not only for philosophy in general but for post-Socratic ancient philosophy in particular, then a comparison of the language which Bacon uses here with that found in *The New Organon's* description of the fate of ancient philosophy suggests that the dismembering of Orpheus represents not only the destructive effect of religion *per se* on moral and civil philosophy's ability to order human society, but also Christianity's destruction of the independence of ancient philosophy in particular, or the distortion of philosophy by religious and theological concerns. In speaking of the condition to which "perturbations and seditions and wars" reduce commonwealths, Bacon says that "if such troubles last, it is not long before letters also and philosophy are so torn in pieces that no traces of them can be found but a few fragments, scattered here and there like planks from a shipwreck; and then a season of barbarism sets in, the waters of Helicon being sunk under the ground, until, according to the appointed vicissitude of things, they break out and issue forth again, perhaps among other nations . . ." (6:722). In *The New Organon*, in the course of a discussion which drops some rather broad hints that Christianity has retarded the development of natural philosophy, Bacon says that "down even to the times of Cicero and subsequent ages, the works of the old philosophers [that is, the pre-Socratic inquirers into nature] still remained. But in the times which followed, when on the inundation of the barbarians into the Roman Empire human learning had suffered shipwreck, then the systems of Aristotle and Plato, like planks of lighter and less solid material, floated on the waves of time and were preserved" (4:76). The "season of barbarism" therefore begins some time after "the times of Cicero and subsequent ages" or with the barbarian invasions of Rome, and extends into that time when the systems of Plato and Aristotle were recovered and preserved. It is tempting but incorrect to identify the season of barbarism with the actual barbarian invasions. The exact duration of that season may be seen by remembering that it was not the invaders of the Roman Empire but rather the medieval church which recovered the thought of Plato and Aristotle and pronounced this fragment of Greek science to be vastly superior to whatever had been lost. As for the exact period during which the waters of Helicon (the river sacred to the Muses) plunged underground, and when they might "break out and issue forth again," Bacon declares his own age to be a worthy candidate to become the third great age of learning, the two previous ones being those of Greece and Rome; he is either conspicuously and significantly silent about, or openly contemptuous toward, the learning of the Christian Middle Ages (4:77). The declaration in "Orpheus" that these flourishings and eclipses of learning take place "according to the appointed vicissitude of things" is clarified in his essay "Of the Vicissitude of Things": "the greatest vicissitude of things amongst men is the vicissitude of sects and religions" (6:514).

Bacon's desires to secure the independence of science and philosophy from religious supervision and to end "the corruption of philosophy by superstition

and an admixture of theology" (4:65) are well known. My suggestion is that these concerns led him to reflect on what it was in previous philosophy which made it vulnerable to this kind of distortion by religion, and in particular what it was about ancient philosophy which had made it unable to resist absorption and domination by the Christian religion.

If I have correctly understood the admittedly elusive hints and suggestions Bacon offers in his interpretation of the myth of Orpheus, his fundamental analysis of the relation between philosophy and religion might be hypothetically restated as follows. Ancient philosophy possessed a certain ability to order human societies through its "power of persuasion and eloquence"; indeed, Bacon seems to have considered, without definitely embracing, the idea that philosophy, rhetoric, and the art of politics might be sufficient by themselves to maintain an orderly civil society without the need for any religious bond or sanction. But ancient philosophy's witting or unwitting failure or refusal to respond effectually to the natural human concern with mortality and self-preservation, its conscious or unconscious rejection of any effort to master nature and employ that mastery to better the earthly condition of man, rendered it vulnerable to the destructive eruption of this concern in the distorted form of frenzied religious enthusiasm, and in particular vulnerable to the Christian claim to render a kind of immortality possible through faith. Ancient philosophy (at least in the dominant Socratic form) had on the whole sought a kind of practical accommodation to moderated and purified forms of the reigning religions with which it was familiar, seeing them as actual or potential sources of support for social peace, individual moderation, and respect for law, written and unwritten. But it did not foresee, or did not pay sufficient attention to, the possibility of a religion such as Christianity; that is, a militant and dogmatic faith with significant philosophical pretensions of its own, whose emphasis on the open and uncompromising adoption of correct belief as the heart of faith bred endless heresies and gave it a potential for promoting social conflict which outweighed its ability to bring believers together. "The quarrels and divisions about religion were evils unknown to the heathen. The reason was, because the religion of the heathen consisted rather in rites and ceremonies than in any constant belief.

. . . But the true God hath this attribute, that he is a *jealous God*; and therefore his worship will endure no mixture nor partner" (6:381). The ancient philosophers had not seen that philosophy's accommodation to a religion of this kind would inevitably become absorption by it, nor that their own lack of any concern with the practical mastery of nature would render their followers unable to resist the claims of a religion which combined philosophy's claim to give a superior account of the most important things with a religious claim to an active, loving, and benevolent concern with the ultimate fate of each individual human life. The failure to overcome through the practical mastery of nature the ignorance and helplessness which decisively strengthen religion's natural hold over the human mind doomed any effort to employ rhetoric to persuade men to "put

off their natures." "Every passion flourishes and acquires vigor by being resisted and forbidden" (6:743), and this concern with one's own mortality, which ancient philosophy had urged men to ignore or transcend, is the ruling or most consistently effectual human passion. Until Orpheus learns how to restore Eurydice to life (or, more modestly, until he learns how to render plausible the claim that he is making steady progress towards that goal), he and his accomplishments will periodically be destroyed by "certain Thracian women under the stimulation and excitement of Bacchus."

The foregoing analysis, which is admittedly speculative, suggests that the power orientation of Baconian science is in part shaped by the desire for a kind of philosophy which can successfully resist domination by religion. One's confidence in the essential correctness of this reading of Bacon's intentions is considerably strengthened by the fact that the work which is both his "utopia" and his most detailed picture of the religious future of mankind (the *New Atlantis*) does indeed describe a society in which science clearly exercises a kind of rule over religion.

No one will deny that Bacon's Bensalem is a utopia in which science and scientists play a very significant public and political role. Salomon's House seems to be the real center of national aspiration and pride; it is called "the very eye of this kingdom" (3:137) and "the noblest foundation that ever was upon the earth" (3:145). Scientific power over nature enables the scientists to advise the citizens how to foresee, prepare for, and minimize the effects of natural disasters of various sorts, and one naturally wonders whether any group which makes such a dramatic and publicly acknowledged contribution to the common good can possibly be denied a share in rule (notably, the scientists are said to advise "the people" rather than "the king" or "the state") (3:166). The scientists are obviously figures of great prestige; the arrival of one of them in the city where the European visitors are staying is depicted as a major public event which brings out the entire populace (3:155). The scientist seems to be a quasi-religious figure; he is greeted by a kind of reverent hush, moves among the citizenry preceded by the signs of office of a bishop and archbishop, and gestures "as [though] blessing the people" (3:154-155). As both a religious and a secular figure, he clearly outranks the Christian priest who deals with the Europeans earlier in the book (3:135-147).

Salomon's House is explicitly stated to be in a position to withhold whatever discoveries and inventions it wishes, not merely from the general public but also from "the state" (3:165). Among other things, this gives the scientists sole possession of advanced military technology; science provides means of coercion as well as persuasion (3:163). The central political role of the scientists is amply indicated by the fact that the book ends with one of them in effect repealing, apparently on his own initiative, a law which has been of fundamental importance to Bensalem for nineteen hundred years: King Solamona had decreed that the island isolate itself from the rest of the world and keep its very

existence a secret (3:144–145), but the Father of Salomon’s House gives the narrator permission to publish an account of Bensalem “for the good of other nations” (3:166), that is, even the oldest and most basic laws are subject to revision by scientists acting in the interests of mankind.

The ultimate implications of this political position of science for the problem of the relationship between science and religion appear most clearly and concretely in the account of the manner in which Christianity was brought to Bensalem (3:136–139). Two aspects of this account are particularly revealing. First, Baconian science is said to have been established in Bensalem about three centuries before the birth of Christ and the arrival of the New Testament in Bensalem (3:144); that is, Bacon himself unambiguously indicates that this kind of science has roots prior to, and hence independent of, Christianity. Second, and most important, the event which heralds the arrival of the Gospel in Bensalem is accepted by the populace as a genuine miracle which proves the divine origin of the Bible only after that miracle has been authenticated as such by a member of Salomon’s House (3:137–138). Bacon depicts a situation which, reflecting his own hopes for the future relation of science and religion, exactly reverses the actual situation in early-modern Europe: rather than Baconian science having to argue its own legitimacy before a Christian society, Christianity has to be vetted and validated by Baconian science in order to be allowed entry into Bensalem. The scientists of Salomon’s House can occupy this position vis-a-vis faith for one reason above all: their own control of nature approaches that which religion had formerly judged to be miraculous. In particular, it gives them the ability to respond effectually to the powerful human concern with self-preservation, which ability or feigned ability Bacon seems to have identified as a principal source of religion’s power; all Christ’s miracles save one, according to Bacon, concerned the preservation, support, or healing of the human body (4:379). The regime of Bensalem has survived for nineteen hundred years (3:144) because scientific power has mastered both of what Bacon identified as the two greatest “vicissitudes” affecting human life: natural disasters, and the social turmoil generated by religious revolution (6:512–514).

Reading Bacon’s interpretation of the Orphic myth as I believe he hoped it might be read therefore reveals its complex and multifaceted connections to other Baconian texts and themes. The portrait of Bacon which emerges is, of course, very different from that found in the standard textbook accounts. The Bacon of *Wisdom of the Ancients* is a thinker in whom antitheological and anti-christian motives are far more important than they are generally thought to have been. In seeking to explain the emergence of power as a goal of early-modern science, one naturally turns to Bacon as one of the first and surely one of the most forceful and influential spokesmen for that point of view. Yet the ultimate grounds of Bacon’s own turn to power rather than truth as the supreme goal of science have remained somewhat mysterious and have been described in the most diverse and mutually contradictory ways. I do not claim to have solved

the mystery here. But Bacon's myth of Orpheus does seem to me to suggest that an important and hitherto neglected motive underlying or (more modestly) reinforcing this turn to power was a desire for a kind of philosophy or science which could, as a result of its own activity, generate the power necessary for philosophers or scientists to rule society—or, if not to rule it directly, at least sufficient to forestall the domination of science and the disruption of society by religion and the spokesmen of religion. More fundamentally, power is the highest goal of Baconian science, power over other human beings as well as power over nature, because power itself is a means to “that whereunto man's nature doth most aspire; which is, immortality or continuance.” Power over nature aims, ultimately, at immortality of the body, but the actual achievement of this goal is at best something for the very distant future, and may be simply impossible. Power over other human beings, which is based in part on understanding them and in part on the coercive and persuasive powers which mastery of nature grants to those who do the mastering, aims at the derivative and substitute “immortality” of lasting fame. (For an extremely clear statement that power over other human beings is as much the goal of the human sciences as power over nature is the goal of natural science, see “Sphinx, or Science,” *Works*, 6:757.) Since the mastery of nature may never reach that state of completion which could assure man of literal immortality, for the foreseeable future mastery of nature is in the last analysis a means to the mastery of man, a mastery in many ways benevolent and certainly not to be simply equated with any sort of crude political tyranny or economic exploitation, yet nevertheless fundamentally self-serving, in the sense of serving the deep need of the self to endure or continue. Bacon's own aim—“immortality” in the form of lasting fame for himself as a founder or prophet of a science which is understood to be making progress towards the rational mastery of all the causes of mortality and decay—might be regarded as a kind of blending of the original “Orphic” goal of philosophy (overcoming death) with Orpheus' subsequent “political” goal of ordering human society as a means of preserving his own name and memory. Viewed in this light, “the relief of man's estate” appears not as something suggested to Bacon by Christianity or by the decay or “secularization” of Christianity, but rather as an instrument serving his own need for “immortality or continuance.”

NOTES

1. By far the best of these discussions is Lisa Jardine's *Francis Bacon: Discovery and the Art of Discourse*, Cambridge: 1974, pp. 173–192. Jardine's view of Bacon's method and intention in *Wisdom of the Ancients* is very similar to the one given here, save that she neither endorses nor rejects the conclusion that writing the book involved fully self-conscious fraud. See also Don Cameron Allen, *Mysteriously Meant: The Recovery of Pagan Symbolism and Allegorical Interpretation in the Renaissance*, Baltimore: 1970, pp. 244–246; Benjamin Farrington, trans. and ed., *The Phi-*

osophy of Francis Bacon, Chicago: 1966, p. 82, n. 1 and p. 121, n. 1; Charles W. Lemmi, *The Classic Deities in Bacon*, Baltimore: 1933, pp. 1–41; Paolo Rossi, *Francis Bacon: From Magic to Science* trans. Sacha Rabinovitch (Chicago: 1968, pp. 81–96).

2. Here and elsewhere it will be obvious that I regard Bacon as a master of Christian rhetoric for a Christian society rather than a sincere believer. I am well aware that this is a minority point of view, but lack space to argue the point here. (I have discussed this question in great detail in “On the Role of Christianity in the Political Philosophy of Francis Bacon” in *Polity*, XIX.3, Spring 1987, pp. 419–442. For Bacon’s hope that he might be regarded as something akin to a god by subsequent generations, see above all, *The New Organon*, Book I, Aphorism 129. [*Works*, 4:114–115]).