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### The Pervasive Politics of Sir Francis Bacon: An Examination of the Trial of Sir Walter Raleigh

Kenneth J. Tymick

Illinois Wesleyan University, [ktymick@iwu.edu](mailto:ktymick@iwu.edu)

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### Abstract

Sir Francis Bacon was a corrupt political pedant, a shameless puppet for James I, and an incorrigible opportunist. He was a frustrated man bedraggled in matters of morals, a bold and blatant self-promoter, and his conscience was perpetually drenched in the swamp of his own financial destitution. Although he remained one of the most brilliant scientific minds in England during the seventeenth-century, during his life Bacon was verily detested by his contemporaries. To achieve his lofty ambitions as advisor, judge, and ultimately Lord Chancellor to the King, Bacon would betray friend and benefactor, publicly and privately, without remorse. He would never act with honor or charity unless it could elevate his position in court. So it stands that when the national hero Sir Walter Raleigh returned a broken and defeated man from a failed expedition in the New World, Bacon advocated the will of James I and the insidious Spanish Ambassador Count Gondomar rather than the will of the people and judged Raleigh vilified and humiliated, subsequently executing him without appeal. These actions of sycophantic statesmanship by Bacon in *A Declaration of the Demeanor and Cariage Of Sir Walter Raleigh* suggest that Raleigh was unjustly tried and condemned.

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Sir Francis Bacon was a corrupt political pedant, a shameless puppet for James I, and an incorrigible opportunist. He was a frustrated man bedraggled in matters of morals, a bold and blatant self-promoter, and his conscience was perpetually drenched in the swamp of his own financial destitution. Although he remained one of the most brilliant scientific minds in England during the seventeenth-century, during his life Bacon was verily detested by his contemporaries. To achieve his lofty ambitions as advisor, judge, and ultimately Lord Chancellor to the King, Bacon would betray friend and benefactor, publicly and privately, without remorse. He would never act with honor or charity unless it could elevate his position in court. So it stands that when the national hero Sir Walter Raleigh returned a broken and defeated man from a failed expedition in the New World, Bacon advocated the will of James I and the insidious Spanish Ambassador Count Gondomar rather than the will of the people and judged Raleigh vilified and humiliated, subsequently executing him without appeal. These actions of sycophantic statesmanship by Bacon in *A Declaration of the Demeanor and Cariage Of Sir Walter Raleigh* suggest that Raleigh was unjustly tried and condemned.

Bacon's infamous justification of the verdict, hereby referred to as *A Declaration*, was drafted on August 20, 1618 as a response to Raleigh's speech protesting against his own execution. Bacon wrote with a trace of the King's words in accordance with his own statesmanlike voice in an attempt to coalesce the public into accepting the justness of their majesty's decision, but as David Mallet remarks, "we have a detestable instance in [Bacon's] behaviour to Sir *Walter Raleigh*. He inveighed against that brave man on his tryal with all the bitterness of cruelty, and in a stile of such abandoned railing as bordered almost on fury."<sup>1</sup> Perhaps not exactly furious, Bacon certainly was malicious enough in his qualification of Raleigh's intent. Portraying the accused as suspect and licentious, Bacon was able to conjure up incriminations that struck more true a reflection of his own corruption and self-serving agenda than of Raleigh's. Starting first with repudiating Raleigh's claim of a gold mine, Bacon writes that James I did not believe in its existence. Even if there was a mine, he argues for James, Spain would have surely found it already because twenty-two years had passed since Raleigh supposedly discovered it. Bacon then shrewdly concedes that "neuertheless Sir *W. Raleigh* had so enchanted the world, with his confident asseueration of that which euery man was willing to beleeeue, as his Maiesties honor was in a manner ingaged, not to deny vnto his people the aduenture and

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1. David Mallet, *The Life of Francis Bacon: Lord Chancellor of England*, (London: Printed for A. Millar, 1740), 47.

hope of so great Riches.”<sup>2</sup> Bacon was a staunch and loyal supporter of king, and on his behalf refused to admit any fault of James’s for the failed expedition. Instead, he made James out to be the victim of some sinister beguiler; he was only a King with his subjects’ best wishes at heart, never suspecting Raleigh’s ill intent. By ridding James of responsibility for the failure of the expedition, Bacon builds up impunity for his king and thereby logically blames the debacle entirely on Raleigh.

Bacon continues to draft increasingly presumptuous and dubious incriminations against Raleigh in what follows his defamatory preface. In the basis of his argument, Bacon asserts:

Sir *Walter Raleigh* made or exhibited, it appeareth plainly... his owne ends : First, to procure his libertie, and then to make new fortunes for him selfe, casting abroad onely this tale of the Mine as a lure... hauing in his eye the *Mexico* Fleete, the sacking and spoyle of Townes planted with Spaniards, the depredation of Ships, and such other purchase...and making account, that if he returned rich, hee would ransome his offences...and if otherwise, he would seeke his fortune by flight, and new enterprises in some forraine Countrey.<sup>3</sup>

There is little merit in this, and what evidence that can be extracted to justify Bacon’s claim is pulled from the testimonies made by Raleigh’s mutinous crew. It is from the mouths of these vocally open opponents that Bacon is able to charge Raleigh at all with such a speculative crime. Raleigh would even be accused of lacking the tools for such an expedition, because his crew never saw an appropriate number of shovels and pickaxes for which to mine the gold.<sup>4</sup> Bacon’s list of damnable evidence grows, citing another crewmate overhearing Raleigh saying that “if hee brought home but a handfull or basketfull of Oare, to shew the King, hee cared for no more...”<sup>5</sup> It must be, Bacon argues, that Raleigh only cared about restoring his credibility, and was driven to piratical and licentious actions when his expedition began to fall apart. He was condemned and vilified for exhibiting the utmost loyalty and subservience to a King he loved.

It was after weeks without discovering the mine that fatigue, discontent, and disease began to jeopardize Raleigh’s mission. Sir Walter Raleigh, one of the last of the Elizabethan suitors, was noble to a fault, refusing to return to his King without finding the treasure he had promised to find. Eventually he would come across a familiar Spanish settlement that had been conciliatory in his

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2. Francis Bacon, *A Declaration of the Demeanor and Cariage of Sir Walter Raleigh, Knight, Aswell in His Voyage, as in and Sithence His Returne: And of the True Motiues and Inducements Which Occasioned His Maiestie to Proceed in Doing Iustice Vpon Him, as Hath Bene Done*, (London: Printed by Bonham Norton and Iohn Bill, 1618).

3. *Ibid.*, 26-27.

4. *Ibid.*, 28. Raleigh’s defense was given, saying the tools were never unpacked from the ship. Further still, a lesser number of materials were acquired for the actual excavation because the mine was only a foot and a half underground.

5. *Ibid.*, 29.

previous expedition. While ill, Raleigh sent his son to lead his men to the settlement where, at this time, a fatal skirmish took place. Confusion and miscommunication enshroud this conflict, but it remains clear that Raleigh consciously led his troops to take over the settlement. Bacon uses this to back Raleigh into a corner, as he explicitly agreed not to engage in open conflict with Spain. Raleigh's reasoning, however, is brushed aside and belittled, as Bacon writes, "hee complains, that the Spaniards of the same place did murder diuers of his men, which came in peace to trade with them, some seuen yeeres past..."<sup>6</sup> This is not merely a complaint, and could instead be used for a solid case of self-defense. If it were the Spanish that instigated Raleigh's crew and shed first blood, the victims would switch sides.

Nevertheless, Raleigh would lose his son in the fight, his second in command would commit suicide, a high fever would continue to ravage him and his crew, and still he would be no closer to finding his gold mine. For Bacon, it became simple to question the existence of the mine entirely, playing off the distress and dissatisfaction of the crew with passages such as, "hee began to be vpon the approaches of his pretended designe of the Mine."<sup>7</sup> *A Declaration* is saturated with qualifications akin to this - ones that doubt Raleigh's true intent, his competency, and his credibility. Bacon inadvertently admits that James did not have any faith or interest in Raleigh's expedition by writing repeatedly of "pretended designs" and fables in place of real wealth. James even threatened to "send him bound hand and foot, into *Spaine*," with "all the gold and goods he should obtaine by Robbery, and bring home, were they never so great."<sup>8</sup> Raleigh assumed a kind of personal relationship between the two, writing of a breach of trust as the origin of this conflict in his *Apology* to King James before his execution, but his naiveté would mean his death.<sup>9</sup>

After surrendering his own ship to his crew's mutiny in the Americas, Raleigh returned to England to await the King's judgment. Striking enough is the fact that Raleigh returned at all. He certainly knew that he would face a trial for his failed expedition, and his action to return contributes more to the nobility of his character than to that of a schemer plotting his freedom. However, Bacon plays that card to the end by inflating and exaggerating a poorly planned escape that Raleigh had little to do with. First, Bacon writes that Raleigh "saw no other way, but in his iourney to London, to counterfeit sicknesse...", so that he might be allowed to preside in his own house rather than a cell, then proposes that Raleigh "assured himselfe ere long, to plot an opportunity of an escape..."<sup>10</sup> During this time, as Bacon neglects to acknowledge, Raleigh had taken the opportunity to draft his *Apology* to James, and his sickness could have easily been a ruse to

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6. Ibid., 31.

7. Ibid., 32.

8. Ibid., 5.

9. Referring to an *Apology for his unlucky Voyage to Guiana* in *An Abridgement of Sir Walter Raleigh's History of the World, in Five Books* by his only grandson Phillip Raleigh.

10. Bacon, *A Declaration*, 43.

give him more time to finish this letter. The other fact Bacon embellishes is that Raleigh plotted an escape, despite the fact that Raleigh never actually acted on any plot. While an escape attempt was discovered, it was conjured up by sympathizers and supporters of Raleigh, who apparently refused their aid. No trial could save Raleigh from James's treacherous will and Bacon's biting pen and *A Declaration* constructed an impenetrable fortress that safeguarded the King's justness. Any defense Raleigh could hope to muster would need to incriminate the King, and bring to light his treachery--a truth that could not exist as long as James was King.

Bacon, then Lord Chancellor and participating judge during the trial of Raleigh, could just as easily have written a stirring defense for the accused, but he had much more to lose by advocating James's treachery. What becomes even more offensive is that the harshness of the sentence seemed to be directly influenced by an ill-reputed Spanish diplomat, Count Gondomar. A century later James would continue to be criticized for his affiliation with Gondomar, as Mallet describes the count leading the king "from error to error: till in the end he made him sacrifice...his honour to the resentments of *Philip*, in the murder of his bravest subject Sir *Walter Raleigh*; the last terror of *Spain*, and only surviving favourite of Queen *Elizabeth*."<sup>11</sup> To many members of the court, Gondomar controlled James's verdict, and as evident in *A Declaration*, it would appear James controlled Bacon's pen. The long and bitter war with Spain under the Elizabethan reign weighed heavily, if not unjustly, on Raleigh's fate. The great Rex Pacificus would allow the murder of one of his most devoted subjects to appease Spanish interest, and Bacon was forced to justify this execution of a national hero. To do so, he was forced to blemish Raleigh's name, otherwise he risked losing favor with the King.

To Bacon, little mattered more than his position in court and his standing with the King, and he would go to great and often pitiful lengths to retain it. The vilification of Raleigh was just another act in his self-serving agenda, and, in addition, *A Declaration* went against all public opinion. For most of the early years of James's reign, Bacon would send countless tracts and doctrines to the king, addressing issues from land reform to religious placation, hoping to impress the new monarch. Nothing Bacon wrote seemed to affect James or his policymaking decisions, and in some junctures only succeeded in irritating the monarch.<sup>12</sup> The Great Contract of 1610, for example would remain a telling tale as to how Bacon functioned for the rest of his time under James's service. It was policy proposed by Bacon's cousin Robert Cecil, and under the pretenses of extending royal prerogative, failed. Historian Joel J. Epstein observes that "Bacon would reveal his opinion of the 1610 fiasco only after the death of his cousin two years later. An analysis of these ideas shows that he supported the contract solely

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11. Mallet, *The Life of Francis Bacon*, 79-80.

12. Perez Zagorin details a variety of tales exploring the nature of Bacon's strained relationship with James, Buckingham, and other members of the royal court in his biography *Francis Bacon*. See bibliography.

out of loyalty, and not because he believed in the wisdom of the policy.”<sup>13</sup> Bacon would continue this sycophantic, hypocritical support of his king for years to come, and is clearly visible in the case of Raleigh. Public opposition was apparent; however, Bacon chose to support yet another decree of his King regardless of his own personal judgment on the matter.

The legacy of this outrage reached far into the future. Nearly 250 years later, Scottish scholar Macvey Napier would write that the execution was a “sentence of condemnation, founded upon the inborn and immutable feelings of the human heart, had gone forth against him; and it was rendered irreversible by the general belief that Raleigh was sacrificed to gratify the resentment, and to appease the fears of the ancient enemy of his country.”<sup>14</sup> *A Declaration*, meant to stain Raleigh’s reputation, served in damaging Bacon’s more. Raleigh was not self-serving and licentious, as Bacon would spin it, and it is more probable that his true intent was derived from loyalty to his country and Crown. Anna Beer suggests that “Raleigh consistently underestimated James’s political will and duplicity: he did not predict...the way in which James used him as a pawn in the negotiations with Spain, nor did he know that the king had already abandoned his cause...”<sup>15</sup> He returned to England ignorant of Gondomar’s grasp on James, and fell victim to the cruel politics of a corrupted judge. His mistake was being too resolute, too eager to prove himself to the king. This is a notion that Bacon should have been entirely familiar with. He vindictively passed the guilty verdict on Raleigh, but it would not be long before Parliament would exercise their impeaching powers to finally humiliate and disgrace Bacon and put an end to his opportunism, corruption, and base sycophancy.

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13. Epstein, *Francis Bacon: A Political Biography*, (Athens: Ohio, 1977), 94.

14. Macvey Napier, *Lord Bacon and Sir Walter Raleigh*, (Cambridge: England, 1853), 267.

15. Anna Beer, “Textual Politics: the Execution of Sir Walter Raleigh.” *Modern Philology*, 24.