

The Bacon Brothers and Italy



Francis Bacon's and Anthony Bacon's connections with Italy, their intelligence network and association with the Shakespeare plays.

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In his 'Discourse on the Life of M. Francis Bacon, Chancellor of England', Pierre Amboise, Bacon's first biographer, who had access to Bacon's papers and letters and is quoted as an authority by Gilbert Wats,¹ appears to say that Francis Bacon visited not only France but also Italy and Spain:-

Capacity and memory were never in any man to such a degree as in this one: so that in a very short time he made himself conversant with all the knowledge he could acquire at College. And although he was then considered capable of undertaking the most important affairs yet, so that he should not fall into the usual fault of young men of his kind (who by hasty ambition often bring to the management of great affairs a mind still full of the crudities of the school), M. Bacon himself wished to acquire that knowledge which in former times made Ulysses so commendable, and earned for him the name of Wise; by the study of the manners of different nations.

I wish to state that he employed some years of his youth in travel, in order to polish his mind and to mould his opinion by intercourse with all kinds of foreigners. France, Italy, and Spain, as the most civilised nations of the world, were those whither his desire for knowledge carried him. And as he saw himself destined one day to hold in his hands the helm of the Kingdom instead of looking only at the people and the different fashions in dress, as do the most of those who travel, he observed judiciously the laws and the customs of the countries through which he passed, noted the different forms of Government in a State, with their advantages or defects, together with all the other matters which might help to make a man able for the government of men.

Pierre Amboise, 'Discourse on the Life of M. Francis Bacon, Chancellor of England,'
Histoire Naturelle de Mre. Francis Bacon (Paris, 1631).²

However, except for Francis Bacon's three-year sojourn in France for which records exist, so far it has not been possible to discover when he might have visited Italy or Spain, if indeed he ever did. It seems unlikely but not impossible, and the fact that he could write about Italy and things Italian as if from first-hand experience makes one wonder. For instance:-

For it is strange to see, now in Europe, such high buildings as the Vatican and Escorial and others be, and yet scarce a very fair room in them.³

The even carriage between the two factions proceedeth not always of moderation, but of a trueness to a man's self, with end to make use of both. Certainly in Italy, they hold it a little suspect in popes, when they have often in their mouth, Padre commune; and take it to be a sign of one that meaneth to refer all to the greatness of his own house.⁴

However, Francis Bacon had plentiful links with Italy and was privy to a wide range of detailed and comprehensive information about the country. Italy was also the primary source for Bacon of the Platonic, Hermetic and Cabalistic philosophy and mystery stream that had flowed via Ficino (in Florence, under the patronage of Cosimo di Giovanni de' Medici) to England, of which Bacon became a master, known to others as "the Third Plato" (Ficino was "the Second Plato").

Francis Bacon spent three years abroad in France (1576-1579) attached to the English embassy, in order to study the laws, languages, politics, history, culture and customs of France and other countries. During this time he helped gather and decipher intelligence of all kinds from across the continent. He planned to visit Italy, which, together with France and Spain, he considered to be the most cultured of all countries, but the dangerous state of affairs in Italy and the sudden, unexpected death of his father, Sir Nicholas Bacon, brought him prematurely back to England. It is not known exactly where Francis was during the twelve months following the funeral of his father, other than that he appears to have resided for a time at Leicester House. There is no record of him returning to the continent to pursue his planned goal of visiting Italy, and he would not have had the finance for it, even if his uncle Lord Burghley (acting *in parentis*) were to have allowed it, which seems unlikely. Eventually, in May 1580, Francis took up residence in Gray's Inn to study law, whilst at the same time carrying on with collating and deciphering intelligence reports for Walsingham, Burghley and the Queen. He became involved with the Leicester-Sydney-Dee circle of philosophers and poets, and, as a poet and producer, with the Gray's Inn masques and revels, and some of the royal pageants and entertainments.

Francis' brother, Anthony Bacon, however, being older than Francis and heir to some estates (Francis was not), was both encouraged and granted permission by Burghley to travel abroad. In the late autumn of 1579 Anthony set off for Paris and, from 1580 to 1592, travelled through Switzerland, France and Navarre acting in a diplomatic capacity and gathering intelligence for Sir Francis Walsingham, the Secretary of State, and his uncle Lord Burghley, the Lord Treasurer, as well as literary and other information for his brother Francis. During this time Anthony employed two Italian merchants and their posts for communication purposes, and became the centre of an intelligence network, receiving confidential material from different sources and compiling digests and analyses of the European political, cultural and religious landscape. He became a friend and correspondent of merchants, scholars, poets, writers, ambassadors, courtiers, aristocrats and royalty in many countries, including Henri of Navarre (later Henri IV of France), Michel de Montaigne, Theodore Beza and Lambert Danaeus.

For a time (1580-2) Anthony stayed with Theodore Beza in Geneva, Switzerland, whose house was a key centre in a network that combined Protestant support groups, intelligence systems, publishing distributors and intellectual circles, which Anthony utilised and which was a linchpin in the network he established. Whilst there Anthony received communications and periodic visits from Nicholas Faunt, one of Sir Francis Walsingham's secretaries and agents, who travelled frequently between Northern Italy and Geneva.

During this time Anthony had the opportunity to travel into Italy, and he may have done so; but we have no records of him actually doing so. However, when Faunt arrived in Geneva from Padua for the last time, in November 1581, on his way home to England via Paris,

Anthony asked Faunt to procure for him a licence of absence for a further three years, intending to visit Italy—in particular Padua, Verona and Venice—and returning to France via the Mediterranean coast. By the end of February 1582 the passport had arrived, but by then Italy was being threatened with invasion by the King of Spain, English travellers were being imprisoned, and the Inquisition had been set up in Venice; so instead Anthony travelled in stages across southern France to Bordeaux and Navarre's kingdom, a good position to receive intelligence by land and sea from Spain.

During the summer of 1582 a comprehensive intelligence report covering the years 1581-2, entitled *Notes on the Present State of Christendom*, was completed and presented as a private State Paper for the Queen and Burghley.⁵ Part of this report was found amongst Francis Bacon's papers, and would appear to have been compiled either by him or by Anthony. The descriptions of the various kings, princes, dukes and states show the information to have been gathered in the years 1581-2, with the writing carried out or at least completed in the summer of 1582.

The *Notes* are brief but wide-ranging. The countries covered in the report include France, Italy, Spain, Austria, Germany, Portugal, Poland, Denmark and Sweden. Italy is treated with considerable detail and was almost certainly described from personal observation, as also were France and Spain, whilst the descriptions of Austria, Poland and Denmark appear to be from rather less personal observation, Portugal and Sweden even less, and Germany from report only. The duchies of Italy and the dukes who ruled them are all described, such as Tuscany, Ferrara, Mantua, Urbino, Parma and Savoy, together with the cities of Florence, Venice, Mantua, Genoa, Lucca and Savoy, as also the Austrian Empire, the principalities of Germany and the kingdoms of Poland, Denmark, Spain and France, together with their rulers and nobles.

In February 1592 Anthony Bacon returned to England and joined his brother at Gray's Inn. Having discovered the treachery of their uncle Lord Burghley, they both moved their allegiance to Essex and established their own intelligence network to serve Essex and thereby the Queen. It was known as Essex's intelligence network, but was headed by Anthony Bacon. Key assistants in this intelligence service included Thomas Phelippes, Nicholas Faunt, Anthony Standen and Henry Wotton:-

- Thomas Phelippes, the best of the cryptanalysts, had been working with Francis and Anthony from the time when Francis was in the embassy in France at the same time as Phelippes.
- Nicholas Faunt had been one of Walsingham's two confidential secretaries and an agent from 1578 until Walsingham's death, and had travelled extensively in France, Germany, Switzerland and Italy during the 1570s and 1580s, carrying dispatches to and from various English agents and spies, and gathering intelligence to send home. He worked with both Anthony and Francis Bacon. His inside knowledge of foreign affairs was highly valued. After Walsingham's death in 1590 Faunt worked for Burghley who, although Lord Treasurer, assumed the Principal Secretary of State's duties as well; but at the same time Faunt continued his collaboration and friendship with Anthony and Francis Bacon.

- Anthony Standen, a former servant of Henry Stuart, Lord Darnley, who lived in exile on the continent after Darnley's death and Mary Stuart's imprisonment, had been a member of the court of the Duke of Tuscany, from whence he used to send secret reports to Sir Francis Walsingham, including details of the Spanish Armada. He had travelled extensively in Turkey, Italy, France and Spain gathering intelligence of all kinds, and had set up spy networks in Spain and France that served the English Crown. He was helped to escape from prison by Anthony Bacon when they were both in Bordeaux. In June 1593 Standen's cover was blown and he returned to England, bearing copious intelligence and expecting to be welcomed by Burghley and the government. However, on his arrival on the shores of England, Burghley showed unwillingness even to allow him to land. Anthony came to Standen's rescue and offered him accommodation in the Bacon chambers at Gray's Inn, the result being that from then on Standen worked closely with the Bacon brothers, sharing his 28 years of experience with them and providing the link with his agent, Anthony Rolston, in Spain.
- Henry Wotton went abroad in 1589 for six years, travelling via Vienna, Venice, Rome and Geneva, and sending intelligence home to Essex. When he returned to England in 1594 he became a secretary to Essex, responsible for handling intelligence material connected with Transylvania, Poland, Italy and Germany.

Others who were closely connected with the Bacon brothers, and who travelled extensively, included Anthony's "cousin" and correspondent, Thomas Bodley, the Anglo-Italian John Florio, the hermeticist Giordano Bruno and the Spaniard Antonio Perez:-

- Thomas Bodley travelled in Germany, France and Italy during 1576-1580, studying languages and public affairs. His father was the printer who published the Geneva Bible in Geneva, in 1562. Bodley arranged the transportation of books back to Francis Bacon in England.
- John Florio taught the Italian language and culture both at Oxford University and to those in the highest echelons of society. He wrote an Italian-English dictionary (published 1598) and translated Montaigne's *Essays*. He lived for some years with Henry Wriothesley, third Earl of Southampton, and was patronised by the Pembrokes, marrying the sister of the poet Samuel Daniel and working in the household of Mary Sydney, Countess of Pembroke.
- Giordano Bruno, born 1548 in Nola, Naples, was an Italian Dominican friar, philosopher, mathematician, poet, and astrologer, who fled Naples in 1576 and travelled to Noli, Savona, Turin, Venice, Padua, Bergamo, Chambery, Lyon, Geneva, Toulouse and Paris. He came to England in 1583, where he lived in London at the house of the French ambassador, Michel de Castelnau, and met members of the Hermetic circle (i.e. the Leicester-Dee-Bacon-Sidney circle). He established a

particular relationship with the poet Philip Sidney and dedicated two of his books to him. Bruno eventually returned to Paris in 1585, after which he travelled on to Marburg, Wittenburg, Prague, Helmstedt, Frankfurt, Padua and Venice. In Venice he was denounced and imprisoned by the Inquisition, sent to Rome and finally executed in 1600.

- Antonio Perez, the former Secretary of State to Philip II of Spain, fled Spain to take refuge in France with Henri IV. In 1593 the French king sent him to England as his envoy, where Perez, offering his services and intelligence to Essex and Anthony Bacon, was befriended by them and given accommodation at Essex House in London. Anthony Bacon struck up a good but challenging friendship with Perez, and the two worked closely together.

In early 1595 Essex and Anthony Bacon asked Antonio Perez to construct an information service in Italy. Perez employed the services of Giacomo Marengo, a former servant of his who lived in Genoa, and Giovanni Basadonna, a merchant of Venice, to assist him. Giovanni Basadonna, who owned a number of ships, had come to England as Venetian factor in 1593. His brother, Antonio Basadonna, also a merchant, was based at Venice, where his house was used as the headquarters for Bacon's agents in Italy.⁶ (The name, business and perhaps also something of the character of Antonio in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* would seem to be derived from Antonio Basadonna.)

Essex, with the Queen's permission, then appointed Peter Wroth to be his paid resident agent at Venice, with the function of acting as an unofficial diplomat for the Queen, collecting intelligence from various Italian contacts of Perez and overseeing the Italian network. However, Wroth died in mid-1595 before reaching Venice and was replaced by Dr Henry Hawkyns, who reached Venice by the end of 1595, where he stayed until 1598. Hawkyns was a Fellow of Peterhouse, Cambridge, who as early as 1593 had been receiving intelligence reports in London from the Paduan resident Richard Willoughby. Once in Venice, Hawkyns sent regular weekly reports to Anthony Bacon, excerpts of which were then read to the Queen. Hawkyns was helped by Giacomo Marengo at Genoa, a close friend of Perez, who came to Venice to discuss the coordination of their intelligence work.

Another important helper was James Guicciardini, whose uncle Lorenzo Guicciardini, in Florence, was a leading official under the Grand Duke of Tuscany, Cosimo II de' Medici (1590-1621), the patron of Galileo. Although his family were prominent Florence line merchants, James Guicciardini was born in London and was the nephew of Edmund Spenser's close friend, Lodowick Bryskett. Following disputes over his father's will, Guicciardini travelled to Florence to deal with them. However, during 1592 and early 1593 he was back in London at the very time when his uncle Lorenzo tried to open secret communications with Burghley on behalf of the Duke, who was anxious that England should endorse Henri IV's conversion to Roman Catholicism. Burghley had been unenthusiastic and this contact with the Grand Duke was passed over to Essex. James Guicciardini was appointed by Essex to be his agent at Florence. Unfortunately, Lorenzo Guicciardini died before James' return to Florence at the end of 1593, and so James took on the role of secret contact between Essex and the Duke, sending useful intelligence on the Duke's behalf not only about Spanish military intentions and papal overtures to Henri IV, but also Italian news.

By this means the bonds between Essex, the Bacon brothers and the Grand Duke of Tuscany grew steadily stronger. This friendship, which extended on into later years, was confirmed by Sir Toby Matthew in his Italian edition of Bacon's *Essays (Saggi Morali, 1617)*.

There were also many other agents and friends or relatives employed to gather intelligence in Italy. For instance, when Guicciardini made another visit to England in late 1596, Essex sent him back to Florence in the company of Sir Thomas Chaloner, who was to supplement Guicciardini's activities and act as the earl's resident emissary in Florence. Then, in the latter part of 1597, Essex sent one of his secretaries, Henry Cuffe, on a mission there which lasted several months. Edmund Bruce, an astronomer and long-term Paduan resident, was employed as an agent for Essex, reporting to Anthony Bacon. Francis Davison, a poet, member of Gray's Inn and a 'knight of the Helmet' in the 1594 Gray's Inn revels, in return for Essex procuring his licence to travel for three years (1595-1597) and giving him money to cover his expenses, was tasked with making a careful report of the places he visited. Henry Archer, who matriculated in Padua at the end of 1596 and came to know Davison whilst in Italy, was instructed by Anthony Bacon to make himself known to Hawkins and Edmund Bruce, and to report back to Bacon about their affairs.

When both Essex and Anthony Bacon died in 1601, the Essex intelligence network dissolved. By that time Robert Cecil's network, which Cecil had assiduously built up since becoming Secretary of State on his father's death in 1598, was well established and easily replaced the Essex network. Francis Bacon still had his remaining friends to call upon and work with, but this must have been a very dark period of his life, redressed only when James Stuart came to the throne in 1603 as James I of England.

It is noteworthy that it was shortly after Anthony Bacon arrived in England in February 1592, and joined his brother and the Essex circle of friends, that the Shakespeare plays and poems started to appear. It is also noteworthy that virtually all of the plays with detailed Italian or French settings, which include most of the comedies, were written between 1592, when Anthony Bacon arrived in England, and 1601, when Anthony Bacon died.

The first recorded performances of any of the Shakespeare plays that we know of—the trilogy (Parts 1, 2 and 3) of *Henry VI*, *Titus Andronicus*, *The Taming of a Shrew*, and possibly *Richard III* under the title of *Buckingham*—were performed by Lord Strange's Men and Pembroke's Men in 1592-4. Both Strange and Pembroke were members of the Essex circle and involved in the patronage of poets. When Strange died in 1594, most of the members of Lord Strange's Men joined the newly-formed Lord Chamberlain's Men under the patronage of the Lord Chamberlain, Sir Henry Carey, 1st Baron Hunsdon, which company then went on to own and perform all the previous and subsequent Shakespeare plays.

The 'Italian' plays,⁷ as distinct from 'Roman' plays, in terms of their settings, are as follows (with common estimated dates of composition):-

- *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (1592-4)
Setting: Verona, Milan, and the frontiers of Mantua
- *The Taming of the Shrew* (1593-4)
Setting: (Pisa to Padua) Padua, and sometimes in Petruchio's home in the country

- *Romeo and Juliet* (1594-6)
Setting: Verona and Mantua
- *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595-6)
Setting: Sabionetta ("Little Athens") and a wood nearby – 25 km southwest of Mantua
- *The Merchant of Venice* (1596-7)
Setting: partly in Venice, and partly at Belmont, the seat of Portia
- *Much Ado about Nothing* (1598-9)
Setting: Messina, Sicily

The following plays which might be classed as partly 'Italian' in terms of setting were either written or finished later than 1601:-

- *All's Well that Ends Well* (1602-5)
Setting: Rousillon⁸ (Catalonia), Paris, Marseilles (France), and Florence (Italy)
- *Othello* (1602-4)
Setting: Venice (for first act) and a sea-port in Cyprus
- *The Tempest* (1610)
Setting: The Sea; afterwards an Island. The main factual location source for the imaginary island is Bermuda, where the Virginia Company shipwreck took place, but there are also colourful descriptions that appear to be derived from the Isle of Vulcano, located off the north coast of Sicily. The imaginary island is described, though, as if it were in the Tyrrhenian Sea, with Prospero being derived from Milan, and Alonso from Naples.
- *The Winter's Tale* (1610-11)
Setting: Sometimes in Sicilia (Palermo), sometimes in Bohemia

All's Well That Ends Well is in fact set mostly in France. The two other 'French' plays, both written in the 1592-1601 'Anthony Bacon' period, are:-

- *Love's Labour's Lost* (1593-4)
Setting: Nérac, the northern capital of the Kingdom of Navarre [near Agen, between Bordeaux and Montauban]
- *As You Like It* (1599)
Setting: Forest of Arden [Ardennes]⁹

See [Bacon Brothers and France](#) for information about the association of the Bacon brothers with these 'French' plays, as also with *The Comedy of Errors* (1592-4), which is set in Ephesus, a place associated with the goddess Artemis and the apostle St John the Beloved.

Endnotes

¹ Amboise is quoted as an authority by Gilbert Wats in the 'Testimonies consecrate to the Merite of the incomparable Philosopher' prefixed to Bacon's *The Advancement and Proficiency of Learning* published in English in 1640, wherein Wats refers to Amboise's "just and elegant discourse upon this life of our Author" and quotes from it.

² Translated from the French by Granville C. Cuningham. See 'A New Life of Lord Bacon', *Baconiana* IV/14 (April 1906).

³ Francis Bacon, *Essay*, 'Of Building'.

⁴ Francis Bacon, *Essay*, 'Of Faction'.

⁵ The *Notes on the Present State of Christendom* were printed as Francis Bacon's in the supplement to the 1734 second collection of manuscripts, *Letters and Remains of the Lord Chancellor Bacon*, studied and put together by Robert Stephens, the Historiographer Royal in the reign of William and Mary. They are reproduced by Spedding in his *Letters and Life of Francis Bacon*, Vol. I, ch.2 (1580-84), section 3.

⁶ Gustav Ungerer, *A Spaniard in Elizabethan England: The Correspondence of Antonio Pérez's Exile*, Volume 2 (Tamesis Books, 1976).

⁷ For an account of the exact locations that are described with precise details in Shakespeare's 'Italian' plays, see Richard Paul Roe, *The Shakespeare Guide to Italy: Retracing the Bard's Unknown Travels* (HarperCollins, 2011).

⁸ Roussillon is a historical region in S France, bordering on the Pyrenees and the Mediterranean.

⁹ Beginning in France, the Ardennes stretches east across Luxembourg and Belgium before continuing on into Germany, covering three Belgian provinces en route – Namur in the west, Luxembourg in the south and Liège in the east. The highest part, lying in the German-speaking east of the country, is the Hautes Fagnes (the High Fens), an expanse of windswept heathland that extends from Eupen to Malmédy. But this is not the Ardennes' most attractive or popular corner, which lies further west, its limits roughly marked by Dinant, La Roche-en-Ardenne and Bouillon.