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BACON AND SHAKESPEARE:
A COMPARISON OF PASSAGES ABOUT
FAVOURITE RENAISSANCE THEMES

This comparative study about parallel passages dealing with some related themes, conceptions and ideas in the writings of Francis Bacon (1561–1626) and William Shakespeare (1564–1616) is almost exclusively based on the works on which the comparison rests. They are here considered as having been written on the whole in the same period (1590–1612) with the only possible exception of Bacon’s New Atlantis (1624), where it is also not so much the contents of ideas that presents a novelty but rather the “utopian” form, in which they are presented. An addition of secondary literature dealing with chronological, literary, philosophical or historical problems in connection with the quoted passages would have considerably augmented the length of the essay. Far from being complete in any respect, it does not even pretend to have chosen the most representative examples for the different items proposed, but simply wants to present a selection of analogous Renaissance

1 Bacon’s New Atlantis was written in 1624, but appeared in print only shortly after his death. The Novum Organum (1620) is not a full exception. Although it was published after 1612, a considerable part of its ideas were first formulated in The Advancement of Learning (1605); similarly quite a few of the “Essays” in the much enlarged form of 1625 had been through two previous editions in 1597 and 1612. As to the Shakespearian works many sonnets were written before or around 1600, in spite of the fact that they appeared in public for the first time only in 1609. From the plays mentioned “Romeo and Juliet” and “Richard III” are believed to belong to Shakespeare’s early work (1591–1594), “As You Like It” to his middle period (1594–1601), “Hamlet”, “Othello”, “King Lear”, “Timon of Athens” to the gloomy years in which he wrote the tragedies (1602–1608) whereas “The Winter’s Tale” and “The Tempest” are considered to be his late “romances”.

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topics treated in a similar way by two great English writers of that age.

The Renaissance is one of those stages in the development of human society in which mankind stands up, as it were in one body, shatters all the prejudices and conventions accumulated during the centuries and wants to find out the truth about things. Illuminated minds from all over Europe living between the 14th and 16th centuries, the period in which most masterpieces of the Renaissance were created, found various ways and means to express one thing: people felt the stiffness of medieval traditions, the dogmas of the Catholic church, the heavy inheritance of scholastic learning to be fetters hindering their development as individuals and nations. So they just threw over board the greater part of the obscure prejudices the "dark" ages (as the English tradition sometimes calls the middle ages) had so firmly established, and boldly set forth on a new way in human development. It was to take them first to – as Francis Bacon terms it in his "New Atlantis" – "a knowledge of causes" i.e. to truth, as a prerogative to any improvement of their condition, of the human condition.

These two great aspirations, to know (and respect) the truth about ourselves and the world we live in as well as to make man's life (out of love for him) more comfortable, coinciding in part with the concepts of "Realism" and "Humanism", are to be found with all representatives of the European Renaissance being universally acknowledged as two of its main characteristics. Men had first to find out how they were and where they stood in order to decide how to become and where to go. In this gigantic effort they had to use all the resources then available and could by no means have renounced to the meritorious work done by their predecessors both in antiquity (to the extent it was then known: i.e. the Hebrew, Greek and Roman civilisations) and in the middle ages. It was only the obsolete beliefs, dogmas that had lived their day, both from antiquity and the middle ages, that they wanted to do away with.

The considerable use made above all of the cultural values of antiquity, however, did by no means go so far as to justify the view