Of Regiment of Health

Francis Bacon

Focus: The Essay

There is a wisdom in this; beyond the rules of physic*: a man's own observation, what he finds good of, and what he finds hurt of, is the best physic to preserve health. But it is a safer conclusion to say, This agreeeth not well with me, therefore, I will not continue it; than this, I find no offence of this, therefore I may use it. For strength of nature in youth, passeth over many excesses, which are owing a man till his age. Discern of the coming on of years, and think not to do the same things still; for age will not be defied. Beware of sudden change, in any great point of diet, and, if necessity enforce it, fit the rest to it. For it is a secret both in nature and state, that it is safer to change many things, rather than one. Examine thy customs of diet, sleep, exercise, apparel, and the like; and try, in any thing thou shalt judge hurtful, to discontinue it, by little and little; but so, as if thou dost find any inconvenience by the change, thou come back to it again: for it is hard to distinguish that which is generally held good and wholesome, from that which is good particularly, and fit for thine own body. To be free-minded and cheerfully disposed, at hours of meat,* and of sleep, and of exercise, is one of the best precepts of long lasting. As for the passions, and studies of the mind; avoid envy, anxious fears; anger fretting inwards; subtle and knotty inquisitions*; joys and exhilarations in excess; sadness not communicated. Entertain hopes; mirth rather than joy; variety of delights, rather than surfeit of them; wonder and admiration, and therefore novelties; studies that fill the mind with splendid and illustrious objects, as histories, fables, and contemplations of nature. If you fly* physic* in health altogether, it will be too strange for your body, when you shall need it. If you make it too familiar, it will work no extraordinary effect, when sickness cometh. I commend rather some diet for certain seasons, than

HELPFUL DEFINITIONS

- physic — the art or practice of healing.
- meat — here, food.
- inquisitions — here, puzzling problems.
- fly — avoid.
- physic — here, medicine.

The following reasons are often cited to fuel the belief of many that Bacon wrote the works commonly attributed to Shakespeare.

a. It is clear that Bacon amassed the knowledge evident in the plays. b. He was a contemporary of Shakespeare. Many of his popular axioms appear, slightly alterred, in the texts. c. Pope and Twain believed Bacon to be the author. d. Bacon and Shakespeare shared a similar style of writing; both were masters of the apt phrase; both shared a pool of vocabulary and metaphor. e. Bacon was broadly educated in science, horticulture, law, medicine, philosophy, classical literature, and history, and was familiar with foreign languages. Critics doubt that Shakespeare was able to master all these skills.

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frequent use of physic, except it be grown into a custom. For those diets alter the body more, and trouble it less. Despise no new accident in your body, but ask opinion of it. In sickness, respect health principally; in health, action. For those that put their bodies to endure in health, may in most sicknesses, which are not very sharp, be cured only with diet, and tendering. Celsus could never have spoken it as a physician, had he not been a wise man withal, when he giveth it for one of the great precepts of health and lasting, that a man do vary, and interchange contraries, but with an inclination to the more benign extreme: use fasting and full eating, but rather full eating; watching* and sleep, but rather sleep; sitting and exercise, but rather exercise; and the like. So shall nature be cherished, and yet taught masteries. Physicians are, some of them, so pleasing and conformable* to the humor* of the patient, as they press not the true cure of the disease; and some other are so regular,* in proceeding according to art for the disease, as they respect not sufficiently the condition of the patient. Take one of a middle temper*; or if it may not be found in one man, combine two of either sort; and forget not to call as well, the best acquainted with your body, as the best reputed of for his faculty.

About 2,000 years ago, Celsus, a Roman citizen, surveyed medical science from Hippocrates to imperial times. Although probably not a physician himself, his collection preserved 72 classical works that would have otherwise been lost to posterity.

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1. Which advice of Bacon’s is still sound and relevant today?
2. Explain the following: “So shall nature be cherished, and yet taught masteries.”
3. What is the “secret” of nature and state?
4. List three effective uses of parallelism.
5. Describe the tone and voice of the essay. How do they help achieve the goal of the work?

**HELPFUL DEFINITIONS**

- **watching** — here, not sleeping; staying up late at night.
- **conformable** — here, agreeable.
- **humor** — here, wish.
- **regular** — here, unvarying in method.
- **middle temper** — characterized by a moderate approach.

**BUILDING THE FUTURE**

Bacon’s private writings were inaccessible to Shakespeare yet there is an eerie similarity between lines in Shakespearean plays and lines ascribed to Bacon. Examples include:

BACON: “It is nothing else but words, which rather sound than signify anything.” SHAKESPEARE: “It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” (Macbeth)

BACON: “Be so true to thyself as thou be not false to others.” SHAKESPEARE: “To thine own self be true, and it must follow, as night the day, Thou canst not then be false to any man.” (Hamlet)

In a private letter Bacon referred to himself as a “concealed poet.” He left a manuscript with a list of works he had created, and some of Shakespeare’s plays are on this list!