

Francis Bacon  
“Of Love”

Francis Bacon (1561-1626) was a major figure in the development of the English Renaissance. He became known at court and was knighted in 1603 after the succession of James I. He was later appointed Lord Chancellor in 1618 but fell from power in 1621 after going into debt and being accused of corruption. Bacon is sometimes known as the “father of the scientific method” for publishing the *Novum Organum Scientiarum* (the New Instrument of Science) in 1620. In this work, he advocated using the empirical method (induction) in all enquiries, as opposed to the “old method” (deduction) of the scholastics of the middle ages.

Bacon published the first edition of his *Essays* in 1597. He borrowed the word *essay* from the French writer Michel de Montaigne. It meant “an attempt or trial,” somewhat like the fragments and proverbs that were popular at the time. He wrote a second edition in 1612 and published an expanded edition in 1625.

Information readily available on the internet has not been glossed. Additions are in brackets [like this].

The stage is more beholding to love than the life of man. For as to the stage, love is ever matter of comedies, and now and then of tragedies, but in life it doth much mischief, sometimes like a siren, sometimes like a fury. You may observe that amongst all the great and worthy persons (whereof the memory remaineth, either ancient or recent) there is not one that hath been transported to the mad degree of love: which shows that great spirits, and great business, do keep out this weak passion. You must except, nevertheless, Marcus Antonius, the half partner of the empire of Rome, and Appius Claudius, the decimvir and lawgiver; whereof the former was indeed a voluptuous man, and inordinate; but the latter was an austere and wise man: and therefore it seems (though rarely) that love can find entrance, not only into an open heart, but also into a heart well-fortified, if watch be not well kept. It is a poor saying of Epicurus, *Satis magnum alter alteri theatrum sumus* [One can find in one’s neighbor a large theater]; as if man, made for the contemplation of heaven, and all noble objects, should do nothing but kneel before a little idol, and make himself a subject, though not of the mouth (as beasts are), yet of the eye, which was given him for higher purposes. It is a strange thing to note the excess of this passion, and how it braves the nature and value of things, by this: that the speaking in a perpetual hyperbole is comely in nothing but in love. Neither is it merely in the phrase, for whereas it hath been well said that the arch-flatterer, with whom all the petty flatterers have intelligence, is a man’s self, certainly the lover is more. For there was never a proud man thought so absurdly well of himself as the lover doth of the person loved, and therefore it was well said: “That it is impossible to love, and to be wise.” Neither doth this weakness appear to others only, and not to the party loved, but to the loved most of all, except the love be reciprocated. For it is a true rule that love is ever rewarded, either with reciprocation, or with an inward and secret contempt. By how much the more men ought to beware of this passion, which loseth not only other things, but itself! As for the other losses, the poet’s relation doth well figure them: that he that preferred Helena, quitted the gifts of Juno and Pallas [in *The Judgment of Paris*]. For whosoever esteemeth too much of amorous affection, quitteth both riches and wisdom. This passion hath his floods in the very times of weakness, which are great prosperity and great adversity, though this latter hath been less observed: both which times kindle love, and make it more fervent, and therefore show it to be the child of folly. They do best who, if they cannot but

admit love, yet make it keep quarter, and sever it wholly from their serious affairs and actions of life; for if it check once with business, it troubleth men's fortunes, and maketh men so that they can no ways be true to their own ends. I know not how, but martial men are given to love. I think it is as they are given to wine; for perils commonly ask to be paid in pleasures. There is in man's nature a secret inclination and motion towards love of others, which, if it be not spent upon someone or a few, doth naturally spread itself towards many, and maketh men become humane and charitable, as it is seen sometime in friars. Nuptial love maketh mankind, friendly love perfecteth it, but wanton love corrupteth and embaseth it.

### **Topics for Writing and Discussion**

1. Bacon takes a by-then traditional approach to passionate love: that it makes a wise man foolish. For example, in Book IV of the *Aeneid*, Virgil shows how the passion of love almost derails Aeneas' duty to found Rome, as he spends a year in Carthage in the arms of its ruler and queen, Dido, who forsakes her own duty to her country, and when Aeneas leaves, commits suicide. Even Plato had described love as a kind of madness. It is hard to discuss passionate love rationally, but poets and writers continue to try. Is passionate love opposed to reason? Does reason go out the window when love comes in the door? Discuss with your group and class.

2. For a good bit of our history, love has been described by men as an affliction, as noted above. However, nearly all cultures have celebrated it as well. For example, in the middle ages in the West, beginning in the eleventh century, poets and troubadours sang of the power of love to elevate and transform individuals into better, more compassionate people. Do you think that love can change people for the better? Discuss with your group. If you are in love, or have been in love, write a paper, giving specific examples, of how it has made you a better individual.