Thomas Hobbes' relationship with Francis Bacon - an introduction

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Hobbes' work as Bacon's amanuensis is well documented. According to John Aubrey, Hobbes took notes for Bacon, translated his Essays, and spent time conversing with him. This account is supported by the testimony of Samuel Sorbière and François du Verdus, and is usually taken to refer to the period in the 1620s, after Bacon's fall, during which Bacon completed the larger part of

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Samuel Sorbière's Relation d'un voyage en Angleterre contains the first published account of Hobbes' time as Bacon's secretary. (Samuel Sorbière, Relation d'un voyage en Angleterre, où sont touchées plusieurs choses, qui regardent l'estat des sciences, & de la religion, & autres matières curieuses (Paris, 1664) p. 97.) A partial English translation of the passage was published as part Thomas Sprat's commentary on Sorbière's text in 1665. (Thomas Sprat, A letter containing some observations on Monsieur de Sorbier's voyage into England (London, 1665) pp. 232-4.) The classic statement of the relationship appeared in Aubrey's Brief lives, which was not published until 1898. (John Aubrey, 'Brief lives', chiefly of contemporaries, set down by John Aubrey, between the years 1669 & 1696, ed. A. Clark, (2 vols. Oxford, 1898) I, 331.) However, two other accounts, based directly or indirectly on Aubrey's manuscripts, were published prior to that. The first, Dr Richard Blackbourne's Vitae Hobbianae auctariun appeared in 1681. (Thomas Hobbes, Thome Hobbes Angli Malmesburiensis philosophi vita (London, 1681) pp. 21 ff.) The second, published in 1750, appeared in a collection of Hobbes' works. (The moral and political works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury (London, 1750) p. xi.) Each version is discussed below.


Sorbière and du Verdus both made Hobbes' acquaintance during his exile in Paris during the 1640s. Both men were interested in the mechanistic philosophy that was being developed by leading members of the circle around Marin Mersenne during this period. Sorbière, organised the printing of the second edition of Hobbes' De cive between 1646-7. Both men produced French translations of Hobbes' works and continued to correspond with Hobbes after he returned to London in 1650. Biographies of both men can be found in Noel Malcolm's ed-
his mature work. Hobbes’ interest in Bacon after the 1620s is less well known, but equally well documented. Hobbes’ read, re-read and discussed Bacon and his works from the 1610s until the end of his life. The three explicit references to Bacon in Hobbes’ works all refer to Bacon’s natural philosophy. Nonetheless, Hobbes also read Bacon’s historical writings and moral and civil philosophy, and looked to his old master as a stylist. Hobbes’ work for Bacon is, as I have noted, well known. Consequently, the focus of this paper is Hobbes’ ongoing interest in Bacon’s works.

First I will present a brief summary of Hobbes’ personal relationship with Bacon. Once this is done I will turn to Hobbes’ knowledge of Bacon’s works. Finally, I will address the school of thought, which originated with Thomas Sprat, postulating an antithetical relationship between the two thinkers. My object here is not to show that Hobbes followed Bacon, but rather to show that he was not his opponent. In order to do this I conclude the second section by examining Hobbes’ attitudes to Galileo Galilei, William Harvey, René Descartes, and Johannes Kepler, and comparing these with his attitude to Bacon. I then discuss Hobbes’ polemic against the Royal Society.

i. Hobbes’ knowledge of Bacon and his works.

a. Amanuensis.

