



## **“Waters of Paradise”: the Place of Balneology in Bacon’s Philosophy**

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### **Abstract:**

Francis Bacon's natural philosophy is a far cry from arid speculation: drawing on Gaston Bachelard's phenomenological vocabulary, one might even say that it goes hand in hand with a poetics of space and an elemental reverie which lead him to meditate on, and pay close attention to, earth, fire, air and water. In *New Atlantis*, for example, Bacon creates a scientific academy whose mission it is to enrich the soil, to breed bigger plants and animals and to experiment with light, heat, sound and even perfumes (among many other things). Yet, because Bensalem is an island, water can perhaps be said to assume even greater importance than earth, air or fire: « We have also a number of artificial wells and fountains, made in imitation of the natural sources and baths; as tinted upon vitriol, sulphur, steel, brass, lead, nitre, and other minerals. And again we have little wells for infusions of many things, where the waters take the virtue quicker and better, than in vessels or basins. And amongst them we have a water which we call Water of Paradise, being, by that we do to it made very sovereign for health, and prolongation of life » (*New Atlantis in Three Early Modern Utopias*, Susan Bruce ed., Oxford, OUP, 1999). If, in the early modern period, balneology triggered conflicting reactions with some people praising the curative virtues of waters and others rejecting them for their supposedly harmful effects, Bacon clearly subscribed to the former theory. Interestingly enough, the *New Atlantis* was written at around the same time that Elizabeth Farrow discovered a spring in Scarborough. That Bacon took more than a fleeting interest in the healing properties of waters is evidenced by the fact that he refers to balneology in several of his works, including *The Advancement of Learning* and the *Historia Vitae et Mortis*. What is more, his interest in the taking of waters extends far beyond its mere therapeutic virtues. Balneology also acquires a political dimension, as can be seen from the following passage from the *New Atlantis*, in which Bacon implicitly refers to More's *Utopia*: « I have read in a book of one of your men, of a Feigned Commonwealth, where the married couple are permitted, before they contract, to see one another naked. This they dislike; for they think it a scorn to give a refusal after so familiar knowledge: but because of many hidden defects in men and women's bodies, they have a more civil way; for they have

near every town a couple of pools, (which they call Adam and Eve's pools,) where it is permitted to one of the friends of the men, and another of the friends of the woman, to see them severally bathe naked. » Far from being peripheral to Bacon's thinking, balneology therefore occupies a central theoretical position in his philosophy. In this paper I propose to explore this theoretical nexus. I will try to show that balneology serves both a political and a scientific function while also bringing together the theoretical and practical aspects of his philosophy.

### **Biography:**

Mickael Popelard is Senior Lecturer in English studies at the University of Caen Normandie, France. He has written several articles and two monographs on Shakespeare and Bacon. His most recent publication is a book he coedited with Sophie Chiari on Shakespeare and Science (*Spectacular Science, Technology and Supersition in the Age of Shakespeare*, Edinburgh University Press, 2017).