



Bacon's "Envy": An Evaluation of Punctuation

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Abstract

Punctuation plays a pivotal role in enhancing comprehensibility of a text. It not only abolishes ambiguity from the text but also adorns the individual style of the author. This paper analyses Bacon's essay "Envy" evaluating the aberrant use of punctuation to understand its impact on holistic comprehension of the essay. Bacon has deviated in some punctuation marks in different situations. Most deviations occur in the use of the comma and the semicolon. The least deviations occur in the use of the period. Two explanations may be inferred from the analysis: First, what seems to be deviant in this regard was normal in his time; second, he deviates on purpose to make the long, complex sentence clear and easy for the reader.

Keywords: punctuation, Bacon's Envy, deviation, comma, semicolon

I

Punctuation is an important tool for bringing clarity into composition. It guides readers where to pause and for how much time. Does a sentence manifest surprise or ask a question? Such questions can be answered only with the help of punctuation marks. As it is believed that "[p]roper punctuation lends a precision to your writing, gives it clarity, conveys to your reader exactly the meaning you intend" (Reader's Digest 338). "Punctuation can make the difference between the understanding of communication... and the absence of that understanding" (Reader's Digest 338). Punctuation marks "can make all the difference in whether your writing makes a favourable or unfavourable impression on others" (Reader's Digest 337).

Apart from ensuring clarity and comprehension of a composition and leaving a positive or negative impression, punctuation becomes an identity marker for writers due to their peculiar and at times individualised uses of punctuation marks. Punctuation is given great importance in formal writing; however, there are a few people, like E. E. Cummings, who do not pay much heed to punctuation. Still, its importance cannot be denied even in literary compositions. Men of letters have different writing styles, at times very peculiar and individual. Writing style of an author may include many elements such as diction, structures of sentence and paragraphs, cohesive devices, coherence, organization of content and punctuation.

II

This paper is an attempt to analyse Bacon's use of punctuation in his essay "Envy". Bacon, as an essayist and prose writer, is famous for his aphoristic and rhetorical style. His essays are full of wisdom, and he is one of the most quoted English authors (Deepak). His essays are studied from



thematic perspective. Or sometimes they are analysed for different literary features of style or choice of diction, but little has been said about his use of punctuation; therefore, an attempt is being made to analyse and understand his use of punctuation. Here, the intention is not to evaluate every instance of using every punctuation mark; instead, the focus of the paper is to analyse deviations from rules in the use of punctuation and impact of such aberrations on holistic comprehension of the essay.

The first and foremost punctuation mark that needs consideration is the period. The period is one of the three end punctuation marks that indicate the end of the sentence. It is placed at the end of declarative or imperative sentences. Since the period is a sentence ending punctuation mark, there is not much deviation found in this essay. Only once Bacon has used the period anomalously in the fifteenth paragraph: “Now, to speak of public envy.¹” (par. 15). This quotation is not a complete sentence because it lacks the basic requirement of a sentence—having at least one independent clause that comprises of subject and predicate. Therefore, it might be called a fragment, not a sentence. So using a full stop here is an aberration as per the rules of formal writing, and the comma is more pertinent instead; however, men of letters have their peculiar writing styles characterised with some deviant uses of punctuation: E. E. Cummings is the most recent example. These deviations adorn originality in Bacon’s style.

The next in importance lies the colon. The colon has a few uses in formal writing; primarily, it functions as an introducer. Hult and Huckin, in *The New Century Handbook*, believe that the colon announces “details related in some way to the statement. These details may be a list of items, a quotation, an appositive, or an explanatory statement” (786). Further, Fowler and Aaron state that “a colon is always preceded by a complete main clause.... A colon may or may not be followed by a main clause” (477). In other words, it cannot introduce a series of items that are the direct objects of a preposition or verb.

III

Bacon employs the colon very sparingly in this essay. There are very few (to be more accurate only two) aberrant uses of the colon. The first use of the colon occurs in the very first paragraph: “for that sets an edge upon envy: and besides, at such times the spirits of the person envied do come forth most into the outward parts, and so meet the blow” (par. 1). As discussed earlier, the colon functions as an introducer, introducing a series, an appositive or an explanatory clause; in the quoted example the clause following the colon qualifies to none of the functions. This clause is an independent clause since it starts with a coordinating conjunction, and the semicolon—not the colon—is an appropriate punctuation mark to set off elements of equal importance. Bacon may have used the colon instead of the semicolon to abate the importance of the previous clause, “for that sets an edge upon envy” (par. 1) since this clause states the result of preceding clause, and he

¹ Used the period within quotation marks intentionally to discuss this use of the period.



equates the clause starting with the words “and besides” with the first main clause of the sentence in importance. In this case, the full stop may be more appropriate than the colon.

The second aberrant use of the colon occurs in paragraph 10: “Concerning those that are more or less subject to envy: First, persons of eminent virtue, when they are advanced, are less envied” (par. 10). The use of the word “first” indicates that the colon introduces a series; however, this paragraph discusses only first type of persons. The next type, “persons of noble birth” (par. 11), is discussed in the next paragraph without explicit mention of the word ‘second’. Since this sentence does not enumerate all the items of series closely one after another, the full stop (period) may have been more apt than the colon. For the third time, Bacon employs the colon in the last paragraph of the essay: “...and therefore it was well said, *Invidia festos dies non agit*: for it is ever working upon some or other” (par. 18). This use of the colon is according to the rules of punctuation marks because the clause following the colon explains the Latin expression in italics. So, this is not a deviation from the norm of punctuation. The next punctuation mark that Bacon has employed in his peculiar way is the semicolon.

The semicolon indicates greater pause than a comma does and has a few functions in formal writing. It is used to separate independent clauses (when they are not joined by coordinating conjunction), long items of series and before conjunctive adverbs (Hult & Huckin; Fowler & Aaron).

In the first paragraph there is one instance of semicolon that appears to be a deviation from the norm. In this instance, Bacon employs a semicolon to separate a dependant clause from the main clause:

They both have vehement wishes; they frame themselves readily into imaginations and suggestions; and they come easily into the eye, especially upon the presence of the objects; which are the points that conduce to fascination, if any such thing there be. (par. 1)

In this example, the first two semicolons separate independent clauses. The second semicolon is used before a coordinating conjunction (i.e. and); however, here semicolon is justified because a comma may have confused the third independent clause with the phrase included in the same clause. Moreover, the sentence includes a series of independent clauses, and this legitimises the use of semicolon. Now, the problem lies in the third use of semicolon which precedes the subordinating conjunction “which” (par. 1). A semicolon does not connect two unequal structures. In this case, Bacon deviates from the standard practice of punctuation. In this essay, the use of semicolon, instead of the comma, to set off independent clauses in compound sentences is very common (pars. 1-3). One reason for such a use may be that the sentences comprise of multiple independent clauses, which are at times structurally lengthy as well.

Bacon’s use of semicolon for setting off two unequal structures of a sentence is not limited to subordinate clauses only. There are some more sentential elements which in fact require a comma



but are separated by a semicolon. In paragraph 6, there is one instance in which Bacon employs a semicolon to separate a participle clause though a comma is felicitous in such a case:

For he that cannot possibly mend his own case will do what he can to impair another's; except these defects light upon a very brave and heroical nature, which thinketh to make his natural wants part of his honor; in that it should be said, that an eunuch, or a lame man, did such great matters; affecting the honor of a miracle; as it was in Narses the eunuch, and Agesilaus and Tamberlanes, that were lame men. (par. 6)

In this sentence, larger sentential elements which include commas are separated by semicolon—which is one of the uses of semicolon (Reader's Digest); however, the semicolon employed before the word “affecting” sets off a participle clause, deviating from the norm. This clause is not equal to the preceding one in importance; instead, the latter is subordinate to the former. Another aberration in the use of semicolon occurs in the very next paragraph (par. 7) of the essay wherein Bacon separates the second verb of compound predicate by a semicolon: “For they are as men fallen out with the times; and think other men's harms a redemption of their own sufferings” (par. 7).

Next, paragraph 8 witnesses another aberrant use of the semicolon. In this instance, the sentence comprises of two subordinate clauses, lacking an independent clause: “Which was the character of Adrian the Emperor; that mortally envied poets and painters and artificers, in works wherein he had a vein to excel” (par. 8). So, according to standard practice of written English, such a structure may be called a fragment rather than a sentence. That discussed, there are many other instances of Bacon's anomalous use of the semicolon. Further discussion of the same may result in reiteration, nothing more.

Another important punctuation mark is the comma. The comma is mostly used punctuation mark in writing with its multiple functions. Hult and Huckin write that “commas are used essentially to interrupt the flow of a sentence, to set off certain parts of it and thereby enhance the sentence's readability” (767). The comma can be used for many functions; however, the most important one is to set off nonessential elements of a clause or a sentence.

First deviant use of the comma occurs in paragraph 2 wherein Bacon uses the comma to introduce a list of clauses: “...we will handle, what persons are apt to envy others; what persons are most subject to be envied themselves; and what is the difference between public and private envy” (par. 2). Here, the use of the comma appears to be inappropriate because it is not used for introducing a series or list; instead, it can set off items of a list. Therefore, a normal structure of the quotation may require omission of the comma and replacement of the semicolon with the comma in the following instances of this sentence. Or the expression preceding the comma may be developed into a complete main clause and the list of clauses may be preceded by the colon. Next two instance of the aberrant use of the comma occur in the second paragraph. In the following sentence, the comma separates subject from predicate: “A man that hath no virtue in himself, ever envieth virtue in others” (par. 3). As a rule, the comma is not used to separate the subject of the clause from its



predicate because the comma is used to enhance readability of the sentence by setting off nonessential elements of the same, not the essential elements of it.

Another sentence that is worth discussing is from the sixth paragraph: “Deformed persons, and eunuchs, and old men, and bastards, are envious” (par. 6). Primarily, peculiarity does not lie in the use of comma, rather it lies in the use of conjunction ‘and’. Bacon employs the word ‘and’ with every item of list in compound subject. One reading of such a use may suggest that the repetition of ‘and’ is for the sake of creating greater pause in reading to accentuate the idea of the sentence. Nevertheless, the last comma preceding the predicate of the sentence seems unnecessary since it sets off the subject from its predicate.

In the next example, Bacon has used the comma to separate the subordinate clause from the main clause: “Cain’s envy was the more vile and malignant towards his brother Abel, because when his sacrifice was better accepted there was no body to look on” (par. 9). Usually, the comma sets off the dependent clause from the independent if the former precedes the latter in position; if the dependent clause follows the independent one, the comma is not required to separate the two except in case the dependent clause is nonessential one. In the aforementioned case, the dependent clause is not nonessential one because it provides the reason for the preceding part of the sentence. Therefore, the comma is not required here to set off the two parts of the sentence.

Formal writing requires that when there are only two elements in the compound predicate of a clause, the comma is not needed to separate the two. Bacon has aberrantly used the comma in the following clause: “For men think that they earn their honors hardly, and pity them sometimes (par. 12). The comma is not required in this clause because when the two independent clause have the same subject, the subject of the latter clause may be omitted leaving the coordinating conjunction in place. More importantly, the comma is to be omitted in such cases. Bacon is not only deviant in using the comma where it is not required but is also aberrant in not using the comma where it is by rule required. Such an aberration is found in the fourteenth paragraph wherein Bacon writes: “Lastly, to conclude this part; as we said in the beginning...” (par.14). Here, the semicolon is not relevant punctuation mark since it sets off a phrase from a clause, which is not the function of the semicolon. A phrase might be better separated through the comma than the semicolon.

Parenthetical or nonessential expressions can be set off from the rest of a statement by three different punctuation marks: dashes, commas and parenthesis. However, they do not carry equal intensity of importance. Quirk and Greenbaum, in this regard, state that “[p]arentheses subordinate more definitely than commas, and dashes are particularly suitable for informal ‘asides’” (460). Similarly, Fowler and Aaron in *The Little, Brown Handbook* state that dashes give the greatest emphasis, whereas parentheses are the least emphatic.

Bacon has used parentheses at three places in his essay “Envy”. First use of parentheses occurs in paragraph 2. In the first instance, parentheses are preferred to commas are dashes because the expression written within the parentheses interrupts the major thought or idea of the clause and is least relevant to the same. Moreover, commas may have overloaded the sentence with one type of



punctuation mark since the sentence already carries too many commas. Likewise, dashes are not felicitous here, for they are used either with informal asides or for emphasis. For the second time he uses parentheses in paragraph 13. Here again, Bacon puts nonessential comment in parentheses to manifest that the remark is only interruptive and not necessary for understanding main thought of the clause. Another instance of parentheses that is worth mentioning occurs in paragraph 17. In this instance the words “though hidden” interrupt the actual statement: “then the envy ... is truly upon the state itself” (par. 17). The parenthetical expression here functions as aside; it is not indispensable for the understanding of actual sentence. Bacon employs parentheses where his major thought is interposed.

Apart from these deviations, Bacon has deviated in the use of quotation marks. According to punctuation rules, quotation from other source are to be cited within quotation marks. Bacon employs a quotation from the Bible (Mathew 13:25): “*the envious man, that soweth tares amongst the wheat by night*” (par. 18). Instead of using quotation marks, Bacon cites the quotation in italics. Similarly, he uses italics for all Latin expressions. This may be a common practice in the days of Bacon to write everything in italics which is not of the author because there thorough consistency in this regard.

IV

The above discussion leads to a conclusion that Bacon’s use of punctuation marks, in majority cases, is in accordance with the norms of formal writing. He adheres to standard practice of punctuation, and the same compliance with the rules brings balance in the structure of his sentences, resulting in parallel structures and antithesis. This balance results in creation of aphoristic and proverbial statements memorised by thousands of people. Despite his mastery over punctuation marks, Bacon’s essay carries a considerable number of aberrations in the use of punctuation marks. Some of the deviations may be ascribed to history because language functions as a living organism and some minor alterations in the use of punctuation may occur due to temporal factor, and some uses that seem to be aberrant today may be normal in the days of Bacon.

Another aspect of these deviant uses is that in some cases it is inevitable due to his writing very long sentences wherein using complex punctuation is necessary to enhance readability of the sentence. Nevertheless, the complex use of punctuation may be avoided with simple revision of the sentences. In some instances, he intentionally creates a greater pause for reader to avoid ambiguity in reading by deviating from normal use of punctuation marks. That said, Bacon is still a great prose writer. Despite all the aberrations and deviations in the use of punctuation marks, this is still a great essay—full of wisdom. These anomalies do not belittle his stature as a great prose writer and father of modern prose.

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