

Of Envy

by Francis Bacon
(1561-1626)

There is none of the affections which have been noted to fascinate or bewitch except love and envy. They both have vehement wishes; they frame themselves readily into imaginations and suggestions; and they come easily into the eye, especially upon the present of the objects. See likewise, the Scripture calls envy an evil eye; and the astrologers call the evil influences of the stars evil aspects; so that still there seems to be acknowledged, in the act of envy, an ejaculation or irradiation of the eye. Nay, some have been so curious as to note that the times when the stroke or percussion of an envious eye most hurt are when the party envied is beheld in glory or triumph; for that sets an edge upon envy. Besides, at such times the star of the person envied shines the brightest and seems most ready to be tarnished.

But leaving these curiosities (though not unworthy to be thought on, in a fit place), 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.

A man that hath no virtue in himself, always envies virtue in others. For men's minds, will either feed upon their own good, or upon others' evil; and he who in need of the one, will prey upon the other; and whoso is out of hope to attain to another's virtue will seek to get even by depressing another's fortune.

A man that is busy and inquisitive is commonly envious. For to know much of other men's matters cannot be because all that ado may concern his own estate; therefore it must needs be that he takes a kind of play-pleasure in looking upon the fortunes of others. Neither can he that minds only his own business find much matter for envy. For envy is a gadding passion and walks the streets, and does not keep to home:

Men of noble birth, are noted to be envious towards prosperous men when they rise. For the distance is altered, and it is like a deceit of the eye that when others come on, they think themselves go back.

Deformed persons, and eunuchs, and old men, and bastards are envious. For he that cannot possibly mend his own life will do what he can to impair another's; except when these defects land upon a very brave and heroic nature, which thinks 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. The same is the case of men that rise after calamities and misfortunes. For they are as men fallen out with the times, and think other men's harms a redemption of their own sufferings.

They that desire to excel in too many matters, out of levity and vanity are ever envious. For they cannot want work, it being impossible, that many, in some one of those things,

should surpass them. Which was the character of Adrian the Emperor who mortally envied poets, and painters, and artificers in works in which he had a desire to excel.

Lastly, near kinsfolks and fellows in office, and those that have been bred together are more apt to envy their equals when those equals are fortunate. For it brings into them their own fortunes, and points at them, and comes more often into their remembrance, and incurs likewise more into the note of others; and envy always redoubles from speech and fame. 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.

Concerning those that are more or less subject to envy. First, persons of eminent virtue, when they are advanced, are less envied. For their fortune seems due to them; and no man envies the payment of a debt, but men do envy unwarranted rewards and unfounded prosperity. Again, envy is always joined with the comparing of a man's self; and where there is no comparison, there is no envy; and therefore kings are not envied, except by other kings. Nevertheless it is to be noted that unworthy persons are most envied, at their first coming in, and afterwards overcome it better; whereas contrariwise, persons of worth and merit are most envied when their fortune continues long. For by that time, though their virtue be the same, yet it hath not the same lustre; for fresh men grow up that darken it.

Persons of noble blood are less envied in their rising. For it seems but right done to their birth. Besides, there seems not much added to their fortune; and envy is as the sunbeams that beat hotter upon a bank, or steep rising ground, than upon a flat. And for the same reason, those that are advanced by degrees, are less envied than those that are advanced suddenly and quickly.

Those that have joined with their honor great travels, cares, or perils are less subject to envy. For men think that they earn their honors, and pity them sometimes; and pity ever heals envy. As you shall observe, the more deep and sober sort of politician, in their greatness, are always bemoaning themselves on what a hard life they lead. Not that they feel it so, but only to abate the edge of envy. But this is to be understood, of business that is laid upon men, and not such, as they call unto themselves. For nothing increases envy more than an unnecessary and ambitious engrossing of business. And nothing extinguishes envy than for a great person to preserve all other inferior officers, in their full rights and pre-eminences of their places. For by that means, there are so many screens between him and envy.

Above all, those are most subject to envy, which carry the greatness of their fortunes in an insolent and proud manner, being never well, but while they are showing how great they are, either by outward pomp or by triumphing over all opposition or competition; whereas wise men will rather sacrifice to envy, in suffering themselves sometimes of purpose to be crossed, and overborne in things that do not much concern them. Notwithstanding, so much is true, that the carriage of greatness, in a plain and open manner (so it be without arrogance and vanity) draws less envy, than if it be in a more

crafty and cunning fashion. For in that course, a man does but disavow fortune; and seems to be conscious of his own lack of worth; and only teaches others to envy him.

Lastly, to conclude this part; as we said in the beginning, that the act of envy had something in it of witchcraft, so there is no other cure of envy except the cure of witchcraft; and that is to remove the lot (as they call it) and to lay it upon another. For which purpose, the wiser sort of great persons bring in ever upon the stage somebody upon whom to derive the envy that would come upon themselves, sometimes upon ministers and servants, sometimes upon colleagues and associates; and the like; and for that turn there are never wanting, some persons of violent and undertaking natures, who, so they may have power and business, will take it at any cost.

Now, to speak of public envy. There is yet some good in public envy, whereas in private, there is none. For public envy is as an ostracism, that eclipses men when they grow too great. And therefore it is a bridle also to great ones to keep them within bounds.

This envy, being in the Latin word *invidia*, goes in the modern language, by the name of discontentment; of which we shall speak, in handling sedition. It is a disease, in a state, like to infection. For as infection spreads upon that which is sound, and taints it; so when envy is gotten once into a state, it traduces even the best actions thereof, and turns them into an ill odor. And therefore there is little won by intermingling of plausible actions. For that argues but a weakness and fear of envy, which hurts so much the more as it is likewise usual in infections; which if you fear them, you call them upon you.

This public envy seems to beat chiefly upon principal officers or ministers, rather than upon kings and estates themselves. But this is a sure rule, that if the envy upon the minister be great, when the cause of it in him is small; or if the envy be general, in a manner upon all the ministers of an estate; then the envy (though hidden) is truly upon the state itself.

We will add this touching the affection of envy; that of all other affections, it is the most importune and continual for it is ever working upon some or other. And I also note, that love and envy do make a man wither away, which other emotions do not because they are not so continual. It is also the vilest emotion, and the most depraved; for which cause it is the proper attribute of the devil, who is called, the envious man, that sows tares amongst the wheat by night; as it always comes to pass, that envy works subtly, and in the dark, and to the prejudice of good things.