

# An Apology for Poetry

By Philip Sidney

## Introduction:

*An Apology for Poetry* (or, *The Defence of Poesy*) is a work of literary criticism by Elizabethan poet Philip Sidney. It was written in approximately 1580 and first published in 1595, after his death.

It is generally believed that he was at least partly motivated by Stephen Gosson, a former playwright who dedicated his attack on the English stage, *The School of Abuse*, to Sidney in 1579, but Sidney primarily addresses more general objections to poetry, such as those of Plato. In his essay, Sidney integrates a number of classical and Italian precepts on fiction. The essence of his defense is that poetry, by combining the liveliness of history with the ethical focus of philosophy, is more effective than either history or philosophy in rousing its readers to virtue. The work also offers important

comments on Edmund Spenser and the Elizabethan stage.

Philip Sidney in his *Apology for Poetry* reacts against the attacks made on poetry by the puritan, Stephen Gosson. To, Sidney, poetry is an art of imitation for specific purpose, it is imitated to teach and delight. According to him, poetry is simply a superior means of communication and its value depends on what is communicated.

So, even history when it is described in a lively and passionate expression becomes poetic. He prefers imaginative literature that teaches better than history and philosophy. Literature has the power to reproduce an ideal golden world not just the brazen world.

Stephen Gosson makes charges on poetry which Sidney answers.

The charges are:

- 1. Poetry is the waste of time.**
- 2. Poetry is mother of lies.**
- 3. It is nurse of abuse.**

### **3. Plato had rightly banished the poets from his ideal world.**

Against these charges, Sidney has answered them in the following ways- Poetry is the source of knowledge and a civilizing force, for Sidney. Gossoon attacks on poetry saying that it corrupts the people and it is the waste of time, but Sidney says that no learning is so good as that which teaches and moves to virtue and that nothing can both teach and amuse so much as poetry does. In essay societies, poetry was the main source of education. He remembers ancient Greek society that respected poets. The poets are always to be looked up. So, poetry is not wasted of time.

To the second charge, Sidney answers that poet does not lie because he never affirms that his fiction is true and can never lie. The poetic truths are ideal and universal. Therefore, poetry cannot be a mother of lies.

Sidney rejects that poetry is the source of abuses. To him, it is people who abuses poetry, not the

vice- versa. Abuses are more nursed by philosophy and history than by poetry, by describing battles, bloodshed, violence etc. On the contrary, poetry helps to maintain morality and peace by avoiding such violence and bloodsheds. Moreover it brings light to knowledge.

Sidney views that Plato in his Republic wanted to banish the abuse of poetry not the poets. He himself was not free from poeticality, which we can find in his dialogues. Plato never says that all poets should be banished. He called for banishing only those poets who are inferior and unable to instruct the children.

For Sidney, art is the imitation of nature but it is not slavish imitation as Plato views. Rather it is creative imitation. Nature is dull, incomplete and ugly. It is artists who turn dull nature in to golden color. He employs his creative faculty, imagination and style of presentation to decorate the raw materials of nature. For Sidney, art is a speaking picture having spatiotemporal

dimension. For Aristotle human action is more important but for Sidney nature is important.

Artists are to create arts considering the level of readers. The only purpose of art is to teach and delight like the whole tendency of Renaissance. Sidney favors poetic justice that is possible in poet's world where good are rewarded and wicked people are punished.

Plato's philosophy on 'virtue' is worthless at the battlefield but poet teaches men how to behave under all circumstances. Moral philosophy teaches virtues through abstract examples and history teaches virtues through concrete examples but both are defective. Poetry teaches virtue by example as well as by percept (blend of abstract and concrete). The poet creates his own world where he gives only the inspiring things and thus poetry holds its superior position to that of philosophy and history.

In the poet's golden world, heroes are ideally presented and evils are corrupt. Didactic effect of a poem depends up on the poet's power to move.

It depends up on the affective quality of poetry. Among the different forms of poetry like lyric, elegy, satire, comedy etc. epic is the best form as it portrays heroic deeds and inspires heroic deeds and inspires people to become courageous and patriotic.

In this way, Sidney defines all the charges against poetry and stands for the sake of universal and timeless quality of poetry making us know why the poets are universal genius.

**Sir Philip Sidney:** Sir Philip Sidney (30 November 1554 – 17 October 1586) was an English poet, **courtier**, scholar and soldier who is remembered as one of the most prominent figures of the Elizabethan age. His works include *Astrophel and Stella*, *The Defence of Poesy* (also known as *The Defence of Poetry* or *An Apology for Poetry*) and *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*.

Born at Penshurst Place, Kent, of an aristocratic family, he was educated

at Shrewsbury and Christ Church, Oxford. He was the eldest son of Sir Henry Sidney and Lady Mary Dudley. His mother was the eldest daughter of John Dudley, 1st Duke of Northumberland, and the sister of Robert Dudley, 1st Earl of Leicester. His younger brother, Robert Sidney was a statesman and patron of the arts, and was created Earl of Leicester in 1618. His younger sister, Mary, married Henry Herbert, 2nd Earl of Pembroke and was a writer, translator and literary patron. Sidney dedicated his longest work, the *Arcadia*, to her. After her brother's death, Mary reworked the *Arcadia*, which became known as *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*.

Like the best of the Elizabethans, Sidney was successful in more than one branch of literature, but none of his literary output was published until after his death. His finest achievement was his connected sequence of 108 love sonnets. These sonnets which owe much to Petrarch and

Ronsard in tone and style, place Sidney as the greatest Elizabethan sonneteer except Shakespeare. Written to his mistress, Lady Penelope Rich, though dedicated to his wife, they reveal true lyric emotion couched in a language delicately archaic. In form Sidney usually adopts the Petrarchan octave (ABBAABBA), with variations in the sestet which include the English final couplet. His artistic contacts were more peaceful and more significant for his lasting fame. During his absence from court, he wrote *Astrophel and Stella* (1591) and the first draft of *The Arcadia* and *The Defence of Poesy*. His pastoral romance *The Arcadia* (1598) is an intricate love story, embodying the ideals of the medieval chivalry, so congenial to Sidney's own spirit. The story is diffused and involved and many secondary love stories interwoven with the main one distract attention. The characters are vague and idealized. The style, in both its strength and its weaknesses, is that of a poet

writing prose; melodious, picturesque, rather artificial and ornamental. The story contains a number of fine lyrics. Somewhat earlier, he had met Edmund Spenser, who dedicated *The Shepheardes Calender* to him. Other literary contacts included membership, along with his friends and fellow poets Fulke Greville, Edward Dyer, Edmund Spenser and Gabriel Harvey, of the (possibly fictitious) "Areopagus", a humanist endeavour to classicise English verse.

**Summary of the text:** In "An Apology for Poetry," Sir Philip Sidney sets out to restore poetry to its rightful place among the arts. Poetry has gotten a bad name in Elizabethan England, disrespected by many of Sidney's contemporaries. But, Sidney contends, critics of poetry do not understand what poetry really is: they have been misled by modern poetry, which is frequently bad. If one understands the true nature of poetry, one will see, as Sidney shows in his essay, that poetry is in fact the "monarch" of the arts. Sidney does so by articulating a theory

of poetry, largely drawn from classical sources, as a tool for teaching virtue and the poet as a semi-divine figure capable of imagining a more perfect version of nature. Armed with this definition, Sidney proceeds to address the major criticisms made of the art of poetry and of the poets who practice it, refuting them with brilliant rhetorical skill.

Following the seven-part structure of a classical oration, Sidney begins with an *exordium*, or introduction. He tells an anecdote about horse-riding, noting that, like his riding **iinstructo GiovanniPietroPugliano**, he will not dwell so much on the writing of poetry as the contemplation and appreciation of it. Since he has become a poet, he feels obliged to say something to restore the reputation of his unelected vocation.

Sidney begins his defense of poetry by noting that poetry was the first of the arts, coming before philosophy and history. Indeed, many of the famous classical philosophers and historians

wrote in poetry, and even those who wrote in prose, like Plato and Herodotus, wrote poetically—that is, they used poetic style to come up with philosophical allegories, in the case of Plato, or to supply vivid historical details, in the case of Herodotus. Indeed, without borrowing from poetry, historians and philosophers would never have become popular, Sidney claims. One can get some indication of the respect in which poets were held in the ancient world by examining the names they were given in Latin and Greek, *vates* and *poietai*. *Vates* means “seer” or “prophet,” and in the classical world, poetry was considered to convey important knowledge about the future. *Poietai* means *maker*, and this title reflects the fact that poets, like God, create new and more perfect realities using their imaginations.

Sidney then moves to the proposition, where offers a definition of poetry as an art of imitation that teaches its audience through “delight,” or pleasure. In its ability to embody ideas in

compelling images, poetry is like “a speaking picture.” Sidney then specifies that the kind of poetry he is interested in is not religious or philosophical, but rather that which is written by “right poets.” This ideal form of poetry is not limited in its subject matter by what exists in nature, but instead creates perfect examples of virtue that, while maybe not real, is well-suited to teaching readers about what it means to be good. Poetry is a more effective teacher of virtue than history or philosophy because, instead of being limited to the realm of abstract ideas, like philosophy, or to the realm of what has actually happened, like history, poetry can present perfect examples of virtue in a way best suited to instruct its readers. The poet can embody the philosopher’s “wordish descriptions” of virtue in compelling characters or stories, which are more pleasurable to read and easier to understand and remember, like Aesop’s *Fables*. The poet should therefore be considered the “right popular philosopher,” since with perfect and pleasurable examples of virtue, like Aeneas from

Virgil's *Aeneid*, poetry can "move" readers to act virtuously. Reading poetry about virtue, Sidney writes, is like taking a "medicine of cherries."

Following the classical structure from this examination to the refutation, Sidney rebuts the criticisms made of poetry by "poet-haters." Sidney outlines the four most serious charges against poetry: that poetry is a waste of time, that the poet is a liar, that poetry corrupts our morals, and that Plato banished poets from his ideal city in the *Republic*. He highlights that all of these objections rest on the power of poetry to move its audience, which means that they are actually reasons to praise poetry. For if poetry is written well, it has enormous power to move its audience to virtue.

Following a short peroration, or conclusion, in which he summarizes the arguments he has made, Sidney devotes the final portion of his essay to a digression on modern English poetry. There is relatively little modern English poetry of any quality, Sidney admits. However, is not

because there is anything wrong with English or with poetry, but rather with the absurd way in which poets write poems and playwrights write plays. Poets must be educated to write more elegantly, borrowing from classical sources without apishly imitating them, as so many poets, orators, and scholars did in Sidney's time. For English is an expressive language with all the apparatus for good literature, and it is simply waiting for skillful writers to use it. Sidney brings "An Apology for Poetry" to a close on this hopeful note—but not before warning readers that, just as poetry has the power to immortalize people in verse, so too does it have the power to condemn others to be forgotten by ignoring them altogether. The critics of poetry should therefore take Sidney's arguments seriously.

**Analysis of the text:** *An Apology for Poetry* is one of the most important contributions to literary theory written in English during the Renaissance. Sidney advocates a place for poetry within the framework of an aristocratic

state, while showing concern for both literary and national identity. Sidney responds in *Apology* to an emerging antipathy to poetry as expressed in Stephen Gosson's *The Schoole of Abuse*. Gosson offers what is in essence an attack on imaginative literature (Griffiths 5). What is at stake in Sidney's argument is a defense of poetry's nobility. The significance of the nobility of poetry is its power to move readers to virtuous action. True poets must teach and delight – a view that dates back to **Horace**.

In an era of antipathy to poetry and puritanical belief in the corruption engendered by literature, Sidney's defense was a significant contribution to the **genre** of literary criticism. It was England's first philosophical defense in which he describes poetry's ancient and indispensable place in society, its **mimetic** nature, and

its **ethical** function. Among Sidney's gifts to his contemporaries were his respect for tradition and willingness to experiment. An example of the latter is his approach to **Plato**. He reconfigures Plato's argument against poets by saying poets are "the least liar." Poets never claim to know the truth, nor "make circles around your imagination," nor rely on authority. As an expression of a cultural attitude descending from Aristotle, Sidney, when stating that the poet "never affirmeth," makes the claim that all statements in literature are hypothetical or pseudo-statements. Sidney, as a traditionalist, however, gives attention to **drama** in contradistinction to poetry. Drama, writes Sidney, is "observing neither rules of honest **civility** nor of skillful poetry" and thus cannot do justice to this genre.

In Sidney's day **anti-theatricality**, an aesthetic and ideological concern, flourished

among Sidney's circle at court. **Theatre** became a contentious issue in part because of the culmination of a growing contempt for the values of the emergent consumer culture. An expanding money economy encouraged **social mobility**. Europe, at this time, had its first encounter with inflation. London's theatres at that time grew in popularity so much that by 1605, despite the introduction of charges, London commercial theatres could accommodate up to eight thousand men and women. Sidney had his own views on drama. In *Apology*, he shows opposition to the current of his day that pays little attention to unity of place in drama, but more specifically, his concern is with the "manner" that the "matter" is conveyed. He explains that tragedy is not bound to history or the narrative but to "laws of poesy," having "liberty, either to feign a quite new matter, or

to frame the history to the most tragical conveniency."

Sidney employs a number of strategies to assert the proper place of poetry. For instance, he argues against the way in which poetry was misaligned with youth, the effeminate and the timorous. He does so by introducing the idea that "poetry is the companion of camps" and by invoking the heroes of ages past. Sidney's reverence for the poet as soldier is significant because he himself was a soldier at one time. Poetry, in *Apology*, becomes an art that requires the noble stirring of courage.

Sidney writes *An Apology for Poetry* in the form of a judicial **oration** for the defense, and thus it is like a trial in structure. Crucial to his defense is the descriptive **discourse** and the idea that poetry creates a separate reality. Sidney employs forensic rhetoric as a tool to make

the **argument** that poetry not only conveys a separate reality, but that it has a long and venerable history, and it does not lie. It is defensible in its own right as a means to move readers to virtuous action.

**Censorship** is one issue Sidney had to overcome through his use of rhetorical devices in the *Apology*. Sidney was also versed in the phenomenon of courtiership. As part of his strategy against the threat of censorship, Sidney uses the structure of classical oration with its conventional divisions such as **exordium** and peroratio. Sidney's use of classical oration stems from his humanist education (Harvey 1). He uses this method to build his argument, by making use of the rhetorical methods in such guides as **Thomas Wilson's** *Arte of Rhetorique* (1553) (Harvey 2). Sidney also uses **metaphor** and **allegory**, to conceal and reveal his position. For instance, his use

of horsemanship as **imagery** and **analogy** substantiates his vision of the transformational power of poetry. Sidney, as author, enters his work undetected in that the **etymology** of his name “Philip” is “horse-lover” (Pask 7). From the opening discourse on horsemanship, Sidney expands on the horse and saddle metaphor throughout his work by the “enlarging of a **conceit**” (Leitch 333). It is Sidney who then guards against a falling out with the “poet-whippers” (Leitch 346). Sidney also attends to the rhetorical concept of memory. Poetry, apart from its ability to delight, has an affinity with memory (Leitch 347).

Method and style are thus key components of the *Apology* to overcome the problem of censorship. For this reason, Sidney consciously defends Horace, and he attacks the privilege that is accorded to “fact.” He

argues that the poet makes no literal claims of truth, is under no illusions, and thus creates statements that are in a sense “fictional” and as true as any others (Bear 5). What is at stake then is not only the value of poetry in the sense of its utility, but also its place in a world replete with strife, the contingent and the provisional.