



# Poetry, A Purifying Force: A Study of Philip Sidney's "An Apology for Poetry"

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## ABSTRACT

This article proposes to scrutinize Philip Sidney's Apology for Poetry. When the history of Western literary criticism is surveyed, it begins with Socrates and moves to Plato, Aristotle, Horace, Longinus and Quintilian with whom classical criticism comes to a halt. when the debate turns to English literary criticism, it starts with Sydney's apology for poetry. In this early British literary critic, the fighter and writer try to protect poetry genre from the heartfelt assault on poetry and its purposes, Stephan Gossoon. His reasons are in accordance with Plato, who similarly told poets that his republic would be forbidden. Philip Sidney puts forth his strong arguments in favor of poetry and makes it very difficult to argue that poetry genres have second place in their beauty and grandeur to any other literary form. He tries to emphasize how poetry was successfully utilized as a vehicle for the transmission of ideas and points of view by the eternal geniuses. In that doing he says that poetry is superior to other knowledge areas.

**Keywords :** Poetry, Apology, Divine origin, Prophetic Nature, Superior, History, Philosophy

## Introduction

Sir Philip Sidney (1554–1586) is often cited as an archetype of the well-rounded 'Renaissance man': his talents were multifold, encompassing not only poetry and cultivated learning but also the virtues of statesmanship and military service. He was born into an aristocratic family, was eventually knighted, and held government appointments which included the governorship of Flushing in the Netherlands. He was involved in war waged by Queen Elizabeth I against

Spain and died from a wound at the age of 32. His friends included the poet Edmund Spenser; he wrote a pastoral romance, *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia* (1581), and he was original in producing a sonnet cycle in the English language, influenced by the Italian poet Petrarch, entitled *Astrophel and Stella* (1581–1582).

Sidney's "*An Apology for poetry*" (1580–1581) is in many ways a seminal text of literary criticism. It is not only a defense but also one of the most acclaimed treatises on poetics of its time. While its ideas are not original, it represents the first synthesis in the English language of the various strands and concerns of Renaissance literary criticism, drawing on Aristotle, Horace, and more recent writers such as Boccaccio and Julius Caesar Scaliger. It raises issues – such as the value and function of poetry, the nature of imitation, and the concept of nature – which were to concern literary critics in numerous languages until the late eighteenth century. Sidney's writing of the *An Apology for poetry* as a defense of poetry was occasioned by an attack on poetry entitled *The School of Abuse* published in 1579 by a Puritan minister, *Stephen Gosson*. Sidney rejects Gosson's Protestant attack on courtly pleasure, effectively defending poetry as a virtuous activity for the aristocracy.

Toward the beginning of the *Apology for poetry* Sidney observes that poetry has fallen from its status as “the highest estimation of learning . . . to be the laughingstock of children.” He produces a wide range of arguments in defense of “poor Poetry,” based on chronology, the authority of ancient tradition, the relation of poetry to nature, the function of poetry as imitation, the status of poetry among the various disciplines of learning, and the relationship of poetry to truth and morality. Sidney's initial argument is that poetry was the first form in which knowledge was expressed, the “first light giver to ignorance,” as bodied forth by figures such as Musaeus, Homer, and Hesiod, Livius, Ennius, Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch. And the first Greek philosophers Thales, Empedocles, Parmenides, and Pythagoras, he points out, expressed their vision in verse. Even Plato used poetic devices such as dialogue and description of setting and circumstance to adorn his philosophy. Again, historians such as Herodotus have borrowed the “fashion” and the “weight” of poetry. Sidney concludes here that “neither philosopher nor historiographer, could at the first have entered into the gates of popular judgments, if they had not taken a great passport of poetry”. His point is that an essential prerequisite of knowledge is pleasure in learning; and it is poetry that has made each of these varieties of knowledge – scientific, moral, philosophical, political – accessible by expressing them in pleasurable forms.

In his defense part, he makes his point clear by re-defining poetry and poet. He defines poetry along the Aristotle in line that it is "an art of imitation, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth; as peaking picture with the end of teach and delight." Adding to the Aristotle an idea, he extends his definition of poetry to a source of knowledge, or pursuit of learning like the other arts such as Philosophy and History. Among these three pursuits of learning ((moral) Philosophy, History, and Poetry), Sidney selects poetry for the rank of "Architectonic (Chief) Science." However, his consideration of Poetry as of the highest rank, above Philosophy and History, is a contradiction with the Aristotle and tradition, for in *Ethics*, Aristotle states, "Above all other learning's stands moral philosophy, for it points out the goal of all wisely directed human efforts".

### **1.0) The Four Accusations against Poetry mentioned in The School of Abuse are -**

- 1.) The first objection against poetry, considered by Sidney, is that a man can better spend his time in acquiring more fruitful knowledge than in the reading of poetry. Simply saying that poetry is the wastage of time.
- 2.) The second charge, that it is the mother of lies.
- 3.) The third charge, that it is the nurse of abuse; infecting us with many pestilent desires.
- 4.) The fourth charge, that Plato had rightly banished poets from his ideal republic.

### **2.0) Philip Sidney's Defence of Poetry :**

#### **➤ Poetry: A Waste of Time**

The first charge against poetry is that it is a form of idle merriment and a total waste of Time. Instead of reading imaginary and fictitious fables of poets, a person may consume his time In a better way by learning some fruitful and practical knowledge. This misconception was so Common that even the most learned scholars believed in it. Sidney answers this charge by Saying that there is no form of learning which is as fruitful as poetry is. Poetry teaches virtue and inspires men to virtuous actions. Unlike other forms of learning, poetry performs a dual function i.e. it not only teaches but also moves men to become to ideal human beings. It teaches the Knowledge of the self which cannot only be used for well-being but also for well doing. Also Poetry is the earliest form of knowledge and it has been enlightening humanity for thousands of years. "No learning is so good as that which reacheth and moveth to virtue, and that none

*can both teach and move thereto so much as poetry”.*

Poetry is the source of knowledge and a civilizing force, for Sidney. Gosson 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 waste of time.

### ➤ **Poetry: Mother of Lies and Falsehood**

The second charge against poetry is that it consists of lies and falsehood. This objection Was inspired by Plato who said that poets tell lies about gods. But Sidney answers this charge By saying that poets cannot be charged of falsehood, as they never claim to tell the facts. We Can call somebody a liar if he is telling lies but claims that he is speaking the truth. A poet never Asserts that his imaginative creation is a fact, so he cannot be accused of lying. In fact, a poet is The least liar of all as compared to a historian, a scientist, or a professional belonging to any Other field of knowledge. We expect nothing but the truth from a historian, yet there can be Found many falsehoods in the books of history. Similarly, there might be errors in the Calculations and suppositions by the learned scientists. But the poet never cites any authorities To prove the truth of his statements; he can never be called a liar. A poet does not write about What is and what is not, but what should be. Aesop cannot said to lie in his fables about animals And beasts because he did not claim any truth for his stores. Yet the morals of his stories are Effective in improving upon our judgment and moving us to virtuous deeds. It has also been Argued that a poet gives names to his imaginary characters which are not true to them. But Sidney counters this by saying that the purpose of naming characters is to make them more Lifelike and memorable and not to put down names in any records, just as in a game of chess, The pieces have names such as the king, the queen, the bishop, or the rook. 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.

## ➤ **Poetry: The Nurse of Abuse**

Thirdly, poetry has been accused as being "the nurse of abuse", i.e. it perverts minds by turning them to wantonness and rendering the youth unheroic and effeminate. It is accused of corrupting people and leading them towards lustful love and sinful actions. Comedy weakens the minds of the reader because of the abundance of amorous conceits, which it contains. Lyrical poetry is equally responsible in this respect because of the passion of love, which it depicts. Even elegiac poetry, laments the absence of a mistress. Simply saying that poetry creates negative impact on people, poetry leads people toward crime and barbarism. But Sidney argues that the fault does not lie with poetry but with some poets who use poetry for such base and trivial purposes. Poetry itself is noble and cannot be corrupt nor can it be the cause of any moral corruption. It is corrupt minds who corrupt poetry. *"Poetry does not abuse man's wit, it is man's wit that abuseth poetry."*

So it is the abuse of poetry that should be condemned and not poetry. The appropriate use of poetry can inspire minds and elevate souls. Sidney further states that the misuse of any knowledge is dangerous. If the knowledge of medicine is misused, it can even prove to be fatal. If a lawyer misuses his knowledge of law, it may lead to further injustice and violation of law. Sidney says that good poetry can stir men to virtuous action. History states that valiant warriors have carried out works for the charge that poetry makes men effeminate, Sidney says that it is the fault of the poets of his time that they portray the emotional and sensational side of love otherwise love itself is not bad. Again the abuse of poetry must be condemned and not poetry.

## ➤ **Plato had banished poets from his Ideal City**

Fourthly, the attackers of poetry point out that Plato, the great philosopher banished poets from his ideal Republic. They say that Plato's verdict in this connection cannot be challenged. But Sidney says that Plato's arguments are also against the abuse of poetry. He banished such abusive poets and not poetry itself. He argues that Plato's dialogues themselves are a form of poetry and he himself drew inspiration and knowledge from poetry. Also how can Plato blame poetry as immoral when he himself, in Republic, has permitted the sharing of women by men. The second argument of Plato was that poets present gods in a wrong light and portray them as having human passions. Sidney says that poets of his time presented gods

according to the prevalent beliefs of that time. Aristotle who was the student of Plato and he himself was a man of high stature defended poets and poetry in his book 'Poetics'.

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.

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.

### 3.) Poetry's Superiority over Philosophy and History

Even a cursory view at Sidney's Apology may prove that Sidney has an exalted conception of the nature and function of poetry. Following Minturno he says that poetry is the first light-giver to ignorance, it nourished before any other art or science. The first philosophers and Historians were poets; and such supreme works as the Psalms of David and the Dialogues of Plato are in reality poetical. Among the Greeks and the Romans, the poet was regarded as a sage or prophet; and no nation, however primitive or barbarous, has been without poets, or has failed to receive delight and instruction from poetry.

Showing the superiority of poetry to history and philosophy Sidney says that while the philosopher teaches by precept alone, and the historian by example alone, the poet conduces most to virtue because he employs both precept and example. The philosopher teaches virtue by showing what virtue is and what vice is, by setting down, in abstract argument, and without clarity or beauty of style, the bare principles of morality. The historian teaches virtue by showing the experience of past ages; but, being tied down to what actually happened, that is, to the particular truth of things and not to general possibilities, the example he depicts draws no necessary consequence. The poet alone accomplishes this dual task.

What the philosopher says should be done, is, by the poet, pictured most perfectly in someone by whom it has been done, thus coupling the general notion with the particular instance.

The philosopher, moreover, teaches the learned only; but the poet teaches all, and so is, in Plutarch's phrase, "the right popular philosopher." He seems only to promise delight, and moves men to virtue unawares. But even if the philosopher

excels-the poet in teaching, he cannot move his readers to virtuous action as the poet can, and this is of higher importance than teaching, for what is the use of teaching virtue if the pupil is not moved to act and accomplish what he is taught? On the other hand, the historian deals with particular instances, with vices and virtues so mingled together in the same personage that the reader can find no pattern to imitate.

The poet improves upon history, he gives examples of vice and virtue for human imitation; he makes virtue succeed and vice fail, and this history can but seldom do. Poetry does not imitate nature; it is the reader who imitates the example of perfection presented to him by the poet. He is thus made virtuous. Poetry, therefore, conduces to virtue, the end of all learning, better than any other art or science.

The basis of Sidney's distinction between the poet and the historian is the famous passage in which Aristotle explains why poetry is more philosophic and of more value than history. The poet deals, not with the particular, but with the universal, with what might or should be, not with what is or has been. But Sidney, in the assertion of this principle, follows Minturno and Scaliger, and goes farther than Aristotle would probably have gone. All arts have the works of nature as their principal objects of imitation, and follow nature as actors follow the lines of their play. Only the poet is not tied to such subjects, but creates another nature better than nature herself. For going hand in hand with nature, and being enclosed not within her limits, but only by, the zodiac of his own imagination," he creates a golden world in place of Nature's brazen; and in the sense he may be compared as a creator with God. Where shall you find in life, asks Sidney, such a friend as Pylades. Such a hero as Orlando, such an excellent man as Aeneas?

Furthermore, he defends poetry vigorously against the puritans' charges, and says that it is not the mother of lies; it is the oldest of all branches of learning and removes ignorance.

It delights as teaches. Poetry does not misuse and debase the mind of man by turning it to Wantonness and by making it un martial and effeminate: it is man's wit that abuses poetry, and poetry that abuses man's wit; and as to making men effeminate, this charge applies to all other sciences more than to poetry, which in its description of battles and praises of valiant men stirs courage and enthusiasm. Lastly, it is pointed out by the enemies of poetry that Plato, one of the greatest of philosophers, banished poets from his ideal commonwealth. But Plato's Dialogues is in reality themselves a form of poetry.

#### 4.) The Special Claims For Poetry Made by Philip Sidney

Sidney made some special claims for poetry. These claims were based on poetry's divine origin, its prophetic nature, its cultural and social value and its universal appeal. Sidney mocked at the critic of poetry who spent a great many wandering words in quips and scoffs. They were according to him like jesters and fools. They failed to understand that poetry had been an instrument for making the barbarous nation civilized. The first claim for poetry is based upon its divine origin. Romans called the poet "Vates" which is as much as diviner, forseer or prophet. The poet is not only an imitator of nature. He is the maker. God has made him in his own image and has given him power of creation. And man shows this power in poetry with force of divine breath. The divine nature of poetry is further suggested by remark of Sydney, "poets are born, not made." "For poetry must not be drawn by the ears, it must be gently led or rather it must be lead which was partly the cause that made the ancient learned affirm it was divine gift and no human skill." The claim for poetry also is based on its prophetic nature. It doesn't deal with things as they are or as they were. It tells us of things as they ought to be. Poets are rightly termed 'Vates'. They imitate, teach and delight like the prophets sings of virtue. Poetry has cultural value also. It has civilizing force. Barbarous nation lose their wild temper and become good. It breeds virtue, the enculturation of which makes man cultured. Poetry deals with universal and has general appeal. Chaucer in his 'Prologue to CanterburyTales' deals with the universal traits of the 'Knight', 'The Nun', 'The Doctor' etc. He is therefore, read more than any dry historian. Shakespeare, in his 'King Lear' or 'Hemlet' or 'Othello' deals with the universal human emotions and passions and thereby strikes a note in the heart of men of all ages. It is the antiquity of poetry that can be cited as one of the claims for poetry. Thus Sidney, by showing the universality and charm of poetry gives a defense of poetry and proves that poetry is not a corrupter of mankind. It is purifying and ennobles mankind. It teaches delight and aesthetic charm is irresistible.

#### Conclusion

To conclude his arguments, Sidney summarizes his main points and perspectives. Poetry was never intended to rival the value of other forms of writing and definitely makes no effort to falsify or replace God. While the poet speaks to general truths such as love, family, mortality, and nature, they do not try to prove that they are right or affirm their truths. Poetry is a type of literary expression that has lasted the tests of time and will remain a vital art form. Sidney used his defense to claim that poetry has more of a place in society than other sciences and writing styles. This essay



has stood the test of time because while he makes valid arguments in a methodical and well-organized way, he also infuses the piece with humor that makes it an easy read. Poetry is an important part of the world and should not be dismissed because of the feelings of society at any given time.

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