

An Apology for Poetry

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 instructor Giovanni Pietro Pugliano, 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.

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Sidney begins his defence 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 *poietae*. *Vates* means "seer" or "prophet," and in the classical world, poetry was considered to convey important knowledge about the future. *Poietae* 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.

Philip Sidney's "An Apology for Poetry" was written around 1580 and published in 1595, some nine years after Sidney's death. Sidney therefore wrote one of the most important treatises on poetry in English before many of England's greatest Elizabethan poets came on the scene. He writes of Chaucer, Gower, and his contemporary Spenser, but never would read Marlowe, Shakespeare, Donne, and the other great poets of the day. It is perhaps not entirely surprising, then, that throughout "An Apology for Poetry," and particularly in its concluding "digression" on literature in vernacular tongues (i.e., modern European rather than ancient languages), Sidney elevates ancient above modern literature. Indeed, while Sidney defends imaginative literature in its ideal forms, he offers a bracing technical critique of the way modern poetry is (mis)written. But in fitting with the emergence of nationalism in the early modern era, he elevates English above other European languages for its expressive potential.

Sidney argues that, in general, ancient poetry has an originality and scope that is lacking from modern literature, and that England in particular suffers from a drought of good poetry. Sidney admires the poetry of Chaucer, Gower, Sackville, and others, but sees his own time as distinctly lacking in English poetry. While England is “mother of excellent minds,” the country, Sidney claims, is a “hard step-mother of poets.” England has not produced anything to rival the 16th-century literature of Scotland, France, or Italy. This is the result of a vicious cycle: the very disregard for poetry means that less good poetry is being written. Poetry “find[s] in our time a hard welcome in England,” and therefore the very earth “decks our soil with fewer laurels than it was accustomed.” England can only really boast lyric poetry and drama, and according to Sidney, neither is particularly well-written.

Sidney offers concrete criticisms of contemporary English poetry, showing that “An Apology for Poetry” isn’t just about praising literature. Indeed, since Sidney has articulated a poetic ideal, he prepares the reader to appreciate the ways in which contemporary vernacular poetry fails to meet it. Though Sidney approves of the tragedies of Buchanan and the pastoral verse of Spenser, few books of poetry “have poetical sinews in them,” and dramatists create “gross absurdities” by mixing genres and ignoring the classical unities of time and place. Comic playwrights, furthermore, play into the hand of poetry’s critics by “stir[ring] laughter in sinful things” and thereby leading their audiences into immorality. The result is that, “like an unmannerly daughter, showing a bad education,” this mediocre and even bad poetry “causeth her mother Poesy’s honesty to be called in question.” In other words, mediocre modern literature gives poetry in general a bad name.

But, Sidney adds, modern literature does not have to be bad. Modern poets can learn through the creative imitation of ancient poetry: that is, by adapting ancient forms to modern needs, and doing so not in Latin, the language of humanist learning, but rather in the languages they actually speak. In general, poets can be educated to write better. “As the fertilest ground must be manured, so must the highest flying with have a Daedalus to guide him,” Sidney writes, alluding to the ancient Greek inventor. Poets should practice imitating ancient authors, and borrow techniques from ancient literature in order to improve their work. Playwrights, for example, should respect classical guidelines for maintaining unity of time and space, and instead of trying to compress large amounts of action into a play, playwrights should consider employing ancient techniques, such as the messenger speech, to summarize action. Similarly, lyric poets lack the *energia* (“vividness”) of ancient love poetry. There is no reason that modern authors who have been trained to write well can’t write poetry as well as the ancients. Sidney asserts that English, “equally with any other tongue in the world,” is capable of “uttering sweetly and properly the conceit of the mind.” Even though Renaissance literature was multilingual, and Sidney himself drew much inspiration from poetry written in foreign languages (especially Italian), he argues that English, more than other European languages, is a particularly expressive language, particularly well-suited to imaginative writing. Perhaps English could be the Latin of the modern world.

The problem of English poetry, Sidney suggests, points to the problem of English eloquence. Sidney's critique of English poetry therefore feeds into a wider critique of court culture. English poets have a predilection for fancy words. Scholars share this problem, as they "cast sugar and spice upon every dish that is served at the table." Humanist authors, educated to imitate apishly, try hard to sound like Demosthenes and Cicero and end up sounding like "sophisters." Courtiers also speak in ridiculous ways. Hence Sidney prefers the talk of a poorly educated nobleman who speaks in the manner "fittest to nature, therein (though he know it not) [...] according to art, though not by art." Just as slavish imitation does not lead to good poetry, so does it not lead to good rhetoric. Poetry and oratory are clearly linked, not only because "both have such affinity in the wordish considerations" but also because Sidney's essay is itself an instance in which the two work hand in hand. Sidney, functioning as both a poet and an orator, uses vivid imagery and metaphor to persuade the reader of the value poetry.

"An Apology for Poetry" is not only the defence of an abstract ideal of poetry, but also the critique of the contemporary poetry of Sidney's own time. Just as the Elizabethan critics must learn to think of poetry differently, so too must playwrights and lyric poets learn to write differently. Both groups belong to a court culture plagued by sophistic eloquence.