

An Apology for Poetry

Sir Philip Sidney

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Philip Sidney (1554-1586) is considered as one of the most important poets as well as critic of Elizabethan era. He was born on 30 November 1554 in Kent England. His father, Sir Henry Sidney was the Lord President of Wales, and his uncle, Robert Dudley, was the Earl of Leicester and Queen Elizabeth's friend and advisor. Sidney is known for his sonnets and his critical work *An Apology for Poetry*.

Among the English critics, Philip Sidney holds a very important place. His *Apology for Poetry* is a spirited defence of poetry against all the charges laid against it since Plato. He considers poetry as the oldest of all branches of learning and establishes its superiority. Poetry, according to Sidney, is superior to philosophy by its charm, to history by its universality, to science by its moral end, to law by its encouragement of human rather than civic goodness. Sidney deals with the usefulness of other forms of poetry also. The pastoral pleases by its helpful comments on contemporary events and life in general, the elegy by its kindly pity for the weakness of mankind, the satire by its pleasant ridicule of folly, the lyric by its sweet praise of all that is praiseworthy and the epic by its representation of the loftiest truths in the loftiest manner.

Stephen Gosson in his *School of Abuse*, leveled four charges against poetry. They were:-

- (a) that there being many other more fruitful knowledges, a man might better spend his time in them than in this;
- (b) that it is the mother of lies;
- (c) that it is the nurse of abuse, infecting us with many

pestilent desires: and

(d) that Plato had banished poets from his ideal republic.

Sidney dismisses the first charge by saying that he has already established that 'no learning is so good as that which teacheth and moveth to virtue, and that none can both teach and move there to so much as poetry.'

His answer to the second objection that poets are liars is that of all writers under the sun the poet is the least liar. The Astronomer, the Geometrician, the historian, and others all make false statements. But the poet 'nothing affirms and therefore never lieth;' his aim being 'to tell not what is or is not, but what should or should not be.' So what he presents is not fact but fiction embodying truth of an ideal kind.

The Third charge against poetry is that all its species are infected with love themes and amorous conceits, which have a demoralising effect on readers. To this charge Sidney replies that poetry does not abuse man's wit, it is man's wit that abuseth poetry. All arts and sciences misused had evil effects, but that did not mean that they were less valuable when rightly employed. Shall the abuse of a thing make the right use odious? Certainly not.

Sidney is rather perplexed at the last charge, namely Plato's rejection of poetry. He wonders why Plato found fault with poetry. In fact, Plato warned men not against poetry but against its abuse by his contemporary poets who filled the world with wrong opinions about the gods. So Plato's objection was directed against the theological concepts. In Ion, Plato gives high and rightly divine commendation to poetry. His description of the poet as 'a light winged and sacred thing' in that dialogue reveals his attitude to poetry. In fact by attributing unto poetry a very inspiring of a divine force, Plato was making a claim

for poetry which he for his part could not endorse. Not only Plato but, Sidney tells us, all great men have honoured poetry.

Regarding the state of Poetry in England from Chaucer to Sidney's own time, Sidney says that few good poems have been produced in England since Chaucer.

Chaucer did marvellously well in *Troilus and Cresseida*. The *Mirroure of Magistrates* also contains some beautiful passages. Earl of Surrey's Lyrics also deserve praise.

Sidney advocates this fact that the English language has some definite advantages. It is appreciable for its adaptability to ancient and modern systems of versification. It admits both the unrhymed quantitative system of the ancient poetry and the rhyme peculiar to modern language.

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