Poetry and Society: A Critique of Phillip Sidney's *Apology for Poetry*

Chukwuyem Othniel Omijie
Department of English and Literature, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.
Email: omijieothniel@gmail.com
&
Chilenwa Ignatius Metu
Department of Humanities, School of General Studies
Federal Polytechnic, Nekede, Owerri, Imo State
Email: meetchileonline@gmail.com

Abstract
Poetry holds a central position in the realm of literature, and its significance to society cannot be overstated. This essay will explore how poet and scholar Sir Philip Sidney effectively put up an argument in favour of poetry in *An Apology for Poetry* to respond to criticism about the usage of poetry for education. In exploring Sidney's perspective, this analysis will focus on the prominent forms of poetry he identified: verse, philosophical poetry, and biblical hymns. By delving into the Apology, the paper will illuminates the fundamental nature of poetry within it. Additionally, it will argue that Sidney's approach was highly compelling, particularly when considering the broader cultural backdrop of its time. It is worth noting that Sidney not only asserted the superiority of poetry as an educational tool but also integrated its practical application and significance into his educational text, thereby bolstering his argument.
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Introduction

An Apology for Poetry is one of the most influential contributions to English Renaissance literary thought. Sidney argues for poetry's role within the framework of an aristocratic state, demonstrating care for literary and national identity. In response to Stephen Gosson's *The Schoole of Abuse*, which harbors a rising disdain for poetry, Sidney offers his rebuttal in the form of apology.

In *An Apology for Poetry*, Sir Philip Sidney sets out to accord poetry its rightful place among the Arts. During the Elizabethan era in England, poetry suffered from a tarnished reputation, often dishonoured by some of Sidney's contemporaries. However, Sidney argues that those who criticize poetry fail to grasp its true essence, having been misguided by the prevalence of subpar modern poetry. In his essay, Sidney sets out to demonstrate that poetry is, in fact, the supreme art form, which he accomplishes by presenting a comprehensive theory of poetry. Drawing heavily from classical sources, he portrays poetry as a means of imparting virtue and envisions the poet as a semi-divine figure capable of envisioning an idealized version of nature. Armed with this definition, Sidney skillfully refutes the major criticisms leveled against poetry and its practitioners, employing his formidable rhetorical prowess. Following the traditional structure of a classical oration, Sidney commences with an exordium, or introduction, in which he shares an anecdote about horse-riding. Similar to his riding instructor Giovanni Pietro Pugliano, Sidney emphasizes the importance of contemplating and appreciating poetry rather than solely focusing on its composition. As a poet himself, he feels compelled to defend and restore the reputation of his chosen vocation.

Sidney's notion that poetry can move men to virtuous action is a Neo-Platonic ideal. Plato (427-347 B.C.), the first of the great Western philosophers, raised questions concerning 'the nature of being, the question of how we know things, the purposes of right action, the structure of an ordered society, the meaning of beauty and love' (Richter 25). Essentially, he is an idealist. Plato, it is true, thought that poetry should be banned from the city of Athens, as he believed that the poet "is an imitator of images and very far removed from the truth (Plato 36). Plato devised the theory of the Forms, in which the Forms are 'those changeless, eternal, and nonmaterial essences or patterns of which the actual visible objects we see are only poor copies' (Fieser 49). According to Plato, genuine knowledge involves understanding the intrinsic nature of things, which corresponds to the Forms. In particular, knowledge of the Form of the Good is crucial for leading a morally upright and virtuous existence. Because the physical world is a copy of the Forms, the poet 'is an imitator of images and is very far removed from the truth' (Plato 36). Art, being three steps removed from the realm of the Forms, is considered an ineffective means of attaining truth and gaining insight into the Forms. It fails to serve as a useful conduit for acquiring knowledge of the Forms.

Plato's Forms serve as a conceptual realm representing an ideal world that individuals must endeavour to comprehend in order to live virtuously. Similarly, Sidney shares the belief that by attaining knowledge of an ideal world, individuals can progress and improve themselves. While philosophers discuss abstract ideals and historians

work with the factual aspects, both positive and negative, of earthly existence, poets have the unique ability to select and project an ideal world. Through this process, they can effectively convey concrete moral teachings to their audience, offering a tangible framework for the pursuit of ideal morality. The poet, Sidney says:

> Beginneth not with obscure definitions, which must blur the margent with interpretations, and load the memory with doubtfulness, be he cometh to you with words set in delightful proportion, either accompanied with, or prepared for, the well-enchanting skill of music; and with a tale forsooth he cometh unto you, with a tale which holdeth children from play, and old men from the chimney corner. And, pretending no more, doth intend the winning of the mind from wickedness to virtue: even as the child is often brought to take most wholesome things by hiding them in such other as have a pleasant taste. (145)

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 like Plato and Herodotus, wrote poetically, that is, they used poetic style to come up with philosophical allegories, with Plato, as a good example or to present vivid historical details, as in the case of Herodotus. To gauge the reverence bestowed upon poets in ancient times, one can examine the titles attributed to them in Latin and Greek: 'vates' and poietes. The term vates signifies a "seer", reflecting the belief held in the classical world that poetry served as a conduit for conveying significant insights into the future. 'Poietes' means maker, and this title reflects the fact that poets are creators, who create emerging and perfect realities by the use of their creative imaginations (Norman, par.3)

Subsequently, Sidney proceeds to present his argument by providing a definition of poetry as an art of representation that educates its audience through the experience of delight or pleasure. He likens poetry, with its capacity to vividly embody ideas in compelling imagery, to a "speaking picture." Furthermore, Sidney states that the type of poetry he is concerned with is not religious or philosophical in nature, but rather the work produced by "right poets" (Norman, par. 4). This ideal form of poetry transcends the limitations imposed by the natural world and instead creates flawless exemplifications of virtue. Although these poetic creations may not be grounded in reality, they serve as effective tools for teaching readers about the essence of goodness. 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 possesses the ability to transform the philosopher's verbal depictions of virtue into captivating characters or narratives, which are not only more enjoyable to read but also easier to comprehend and retain, much like the timeless tales found in Aesop's Fables. Consequently, poets should be regarded as the "right popular philosopher," as they can inspire readers to virtuous action by presenting flawless and engaging instances of virtue, such as Virgil's Aeneas. Sidney suggests that reading poetry that encompasses virtuous themes is akin to consuming a "medicine of cherries," implying that it is both pleasurable and beneficial to one's moral well-being.

In a classical manner, Sidney proceeds from the initial examination to the refutation, countering the criticisms leveled against poetry by those who hold animosity toward poets. He outlines the four primary accusations that are often directed at poetry: its alleged time-wasting nature, the perception of poets as liars, the notion that poetry corrupts morals, and the reference to Plato's expulsion of poets from his ideal city in the Republic. Sidney emphasizes that all of these objections stem from the inherent power of poetry to evoke emotions and influence its audience, which in fact, serves as a compelling reason to celebrate poetry. He argues that when poetry is crafted skillfully, it possesses immense potential to inspire its readers toward virtuous behaviour.

After a concise conclusion, where he provides a summary of his arguments, Sidney dedicates the concluding segment of his essay to a digression concerning contemporary English poetry. There is relatively, little modern English poetry of any quality, Sidney admits. For Sidney, the problem is 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 (Norman, par. 5). Sidney brings *An Apology for Poetry* to a close on this hopeful note, with a warning that, just as poetry has the power to immortalize people in verse, it also has the power to condemn others to be forgotten by ignoring them altogether.

A Critique of Sir Philip Sidney's *Apology for Poetry*

In 1595 Sir Philip Sidney's *An Apology for Poetry* was published, becoming 'the first significant piece of literary criticism in the English language' (Richter 132). *Apology for Poetry* (1580–1581) is in many ways a seminal text of literary criticism. Not only does Sidney's work serve as a defence of poetry, but it also stands as one of the most highly regarded treatises on poetics during its era. Although its ideas may not be entirely original, it marks the first comprehensive amalgamation in the English language of diverse elements and preoccupations within

Renaissance literary criticism. Sidney draws inspiration from the writings of Aristotle, Horace, and more contemporary figures like Boccaccio. The treatise delves into significant issues that continued to preoccupy literary critics across various languages until the late eighteenth century. These issues include the value and purpose of poetry, the nature of imitation, and the concept of nature itself. The following lines from Sidney, clearly states the occasion of his work:

> …who (I know not by what mischance) in these my not old years and idlest times, having slipped into the title of a poet, am provoked to say something unto you in the defence of that my unelected vocation, which if I handle with more good will than good reasons, bear with me...And yet I must say that, as I have just cause to make a pitiful defence of poor poetry, which from almost the highest estimation of learning is fallen to be the laughing-stock of children, so have I need to bring some more available proofs, since the former is by no man barred of his deserved credit, the silly latter hath had even the names of philosophers used to the defacing of it, with great danger of civil war among the Muses. (*An Apology for Poetry* 109-110)

Near the beginning of *An Apology for Poetry*, Sidney laments that poetry has fallen from high esteem 'to be the laughing stock of children' (136) and with this, he proceeds to give an argument for the value of poetry. He produces a wide range of arguments in defence 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 brought forth by figures such as Musaeus, Homer, and Hesiod, Livius, Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch (116–117). Sidney concludes here that 'neither philosophers nor historiographers could at the first have entered into the gates of popular judgments, if they had not taken a great passport of poetry' (118). 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 (118).

Sidney's second argument might be called the 'argument from tradition' since it appeals to the ancient Roman and Greek conceptions of poetry and 'stands upon their authorities' (119). Sidney argues that this definition of the poet was quite 'reasonable', as shown by the fact that the Psalms of David are a 'divine poem', whereby prophecy is expressed in a poetic manner. Hence poetry does not deserve the 'ridiculous estimation' into which it has lapsed, and 'deserveth not to be scourged out of the Church of God' (120).

The ancient Greek definition of poetry is even more important for Sidney, providing access into his own view of the connection between poetry and nature. Sidney reminds the reader that the Greek origin of the English word 'poet' was the word 'poiein', meaning 'to make' (120). According to Sidney, every art revolves around the "works of Nature" as its primary focus. For instance, astronomers observe the natural order of stars, while geometricians and arithmeticians examine quantities as they occur in nature. Natural philosophers explore the physical aspects of nature, and moral philosophers contemplate the inherent virtues and vices found within it. Similarly, grammarians, rhetoricians, and logicians expound upon the rules of speech, persuasion, and reasoning, respectively, all rooted in the principles of nature. Sidney is diligent in placing this human creativity within a theological framework. Though man is a 'maker' or poet, his ability derives from his 'heavenly Maker …who having made man to his own likeness, set him beyond and over all the works of that second nature, which in nothing he showeth so much as in poetry: when with the force of a divine breath, he bringeth things forth far surpassing her doings' (122). Sidney goes on to refer to original sin, as a result of which 'our erected wit, maketh us know what perfection is, and yet our infected will, keepeth us from reaching unto it' (122). Of great significance is the inherent connection that Sidney endeavours to establish between humanity's capacity to create poetry and its relationship to God. The notion that humans are created in the image of God finds its most profound expression in their ability to imitate, albeit on a lesser scale, God's role as a creator. This concept further suggests that humans are elevated above the realm of physical nature. The divine-like creative activity present in humans, which sets them apart from the rest of nature, finds its greatest manifestation in poetry. Through poetry, particularly in the exercise of "wit," we catch a glimpse of perfection, even though our flawed will, tainted by original sin, hinders us from fully attaining it. Sidney later elaborates on this fundamentally theological purpose of poetry in his text.
It is evident that Sidney's perspective positions poetry as superior to nature, but his understanding of poetry as imitation does not suggest a mere servile replication of nature. He states that poetry 'is an art of imitation, for so Aristotle termeth it in his word mimesis , that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth: to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture: with this end, to teach and delight' (123). In this definition, Sidney incorporates elements from Aristotle and Horace of the early modern period to present his own expanded perspective on imitation. He proposes the existence of three types of poetic imitation. The first type involves poetry that imitates the incomprehensible excellencies of God, as seen in the poetic sections of the Old Testament. The second kind of imitation is effected by poetry that deals with subjects whose scope is philosophical, historical,

or scientific, such as the works of Cato, Lucretius, Manilius, or Lucan (123). This kind, Sidney observes, is determined by its field of study, being 'wrapped within the fold of the proposed subject', rather than relying on the poet's 'own invention' (124). It is the final kind of imitation proposed by Sidney that lifts it free of the constraints imposed by Aristotle. This third kind, urges Sidney, is produced by 'right poets …who having no law but wit, bestow that in colors upon you which is fittest for the eye to see'. These are the poets who "most properly do imitate to teach and delight, and to imitate, borrow nothing of what is, hath been, or shall be: but range only…into the divine consideration of what may be, and should be' (124). Consequently, the poet enjoys freedom from reliance on nature in at least two aspects. Firstly, the poet is not constrained by any specific subject matter or limited to a particular realm of nature. Secondly, the poet's "imitation" does not entail a literal reproduction of natural phenomena, as their focus lies not on actuality but on presenting portrayals of probability and idealized scenarios.

The ultimate aim of this kind of poetry is moral: the poet imitates, says Sidney, in order 'both to delight and teach'. The object of both teaching and delighting is goodness: by delighting, the poet moves people to welcome goodness; and by teaching, he enables them to 'know that goodness whereunto they are moved'. And this, says Sidney, is 'the noblest scope to which ever any learning was directed' (124). Given these aims of poetry, it is not surprising that Sidney relegates 'rhyming and versing' to the status of ornaments: it is not these which produce a poet but, rather, the 'feigning notable images of virtues, vices…with …delightful teaching' (125). However, Sidney sees all learning, and not just poetry, as directed to this final end or purpose: 'to lead and draw us to as high a perfection, as our degenerate souls made worse by their clayey lodgings, can be capable of' (125). According to Sidney, the poet's primary competitors in this aspect are the moral philosopher and the historian. The former will claim that his path to virtue is the most direct since he will teach what virtue and vice are, how passion must be mastered, and how the domain of virtue extends into family and society (127). The historian, on the other hand, will claim that moral philosophers merely teach virtue 'by certain abstract considerations', whereas his own discipline, history, will offer concrete examples of virtue based on the part v: the early modern period to the enlightenment "experience of many ages' (127). Sidney mentions another potential candidate for the role of teaching virtue: the lawyer. However, he quickly dismisses the lawyer's claim, noting that the lawyer's purpose is not to make people good but rather to ensure that their wrongdoing does not harm others. According to Sidney, it is the incomparable poet who fulfills both roles, as they combine general principles with specific examples to effectively impart virtuous ideals. The poet paints a "perfect picture" of the philosopher's abstract insight, providing an image of what in philosophy is merely a 'wordish description' (129). It is poetry which can strike the soul and the inward sentiments by means of "a true lively knowledge." The philosopher's declarations remain dark 'if they be not illuminated or figured forth by the speaking picture of poesy' (130). It is poetry which brings to life all the virtues, vices, and passions, and hence the 'feigned images' of poetry have 'more force in teaching' than the 'regular instruction' of philosophy (131). And, whereas the philosopher teaches 'obscurely' such that only learned people can understand him, the 'poet is the food for the tenderest stomachs, the poet is indeed the right popular philosopher', as shown by Aesop's fables, which use accessible allegories (131). The power of poetry to move or influence people, says Sidney, 'is of a higher degree than teaching…it is well-nigh the cause and the effect of teaching' (136). For people to be taught, they must first be filled with desire to learn: citing Aristotle's dictum that the fruit of learning must not be merely gnosis (knowing) but praxis (doing), Sidney holds that poetry inspires people to perform what philosophy merely teaches in the abstract (136). Sidney even argues that a fictional presentation of a character as he "should be' is preferable to a portrayal of the actual historical character in his imperfection. A 'feigned example', he says, has 'as much force to teach, as a true example' (133). Since the historian is tied to reality, he is not at liberty to present the ideal pattern of people or events, whereas the poet can 'frame his example to that which is most reasonable' (133). Moreover, whatever the historian can relate in terms of true events, the poet can make by his own imitation, 'beautifying it both for further teaching, and more delighting…having all…under the authority of his pen' (134). The emphasis here is on the poet's freedom, which allows him to choose his material, to frame it in an ideal pattern, so that he can present virtue 'in her best colours', setting out his words 'in delightful proportion' (134-137).

Sidney considers heroic poetry to be the 'best, and most accomplished kind of poetry' since it both 'instructeth the mind' and 'most inflameth the mind with desire to be worthy' (144). Sidney's perspective on the role of poetry, as demonstrated in these remarks, can be understood through three key functions: firstly, to educate individuals about the essence of virtue; secondly, to inspire virtuous behaviour in people; and underlying these two functions, to emphasize the fleeting and insignificant nature of worldly matters. Since knowledge depends on memory, poetry has an affinity with knowledge (146–147). Moreover, since poetry 'teacheth and moveth to virtue', there can be no 'more fruitful knowledge' than this (148). The second charge is that poetry 'is the mother of lies' (147). Sidney's famous retort is that 'the poet …nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth' (148). Unlike the historian, the poet does not claim to be telling the truth; he is not relating 'what is, or is not, but what should or should not be'. He is writing 'not affirmatively, but allegorically, and figuratively' (149). The next objection to poetry is that

it 'abuseth men's wit, training it to wanton sinfulness, and lustful love' (150). The fault here, says Sidney, is with particular poets who have abused their art, not with the art itself. It is not that 'poetry abuseth man's wit, but that, man's wit abuseth poetry' (150).

Sidney ends his text with a lamentation, rather than an inquiry, over the impoverished state to which poetry has declined in England. Poetry has become the province of 'base men, with servile wits' (158). While he acknowledges that poetry is a 'divine gift' and dependent on genius, Sidney bemoans the fact that these would-be poets ignore the need to labour at their craft, a craft whose principles must be 'art, imitation, and exercise' (159). He concludes by admonishing the reader no more to scorn this sacred art, reminding him of his earlier arguments and the various authorities he has invoked. He entreats the reader to believe that 'there are many mysteries contained in poetry, which of purpose were written darkly, least by profane wits, it should be abused' (169). And he curses those who are possessed of 'so earth-creeping a mind, that it cannot lift itself up, to look to the sky of poetry' (170). The metaphor employed here captures the essence of Sidney's entire argument. In the past, sacred scripture was described in similar terms, portrayed as being written in an obscure manner to remain inaccessible to unworthy individuals. In Sidney's work, poetry is elevated to a comparable sacred status, inherently detached from worldly and mundane matters. It becomes the elevated realm of human imagination and creativity, akin to a heavenly sphere of human innovation and pursuit.

Conclusion

In *An Apology for Poetry*, Sir Philip Sidney sets bent to restore poetry to its rightful place among the humanities. Poetry has acquired an unfavorable reputation in Elizabethan England, lacking respect from many of Sidney's contemporaries. However, Sidney argues that critics of poetry fail to grasp its true essence, having been misguided by the prevalence of poor-quality modern poetry. Understanding the genuine nature of poetry, as Sidney demonstrates in his essay, reveals its elevated status as the 'monarch' of the humanities. Drawing heavily from classical sources, Sidney presents a theory of poetry as a means to impart virtue, portraying the poet as a semi-divine figure with the ability to envision an idealized rendition of nature. Armed with this definition, Sidney proceeds to deal with the main criticisms made from the art of poetry and of the poets who practice it, refuting them with brilliant rhetorical skills.

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