

# Philip Sidney's *The Defense of Poesy*, otherwise known as *An Apology for Poetry* (c. 1581, published in 1595)

## A. The age, its cross-currents and undercurrents

1. Sidney in dialogue with his times as well as with the classical authors such as Plato, Aristotle, Horace and so on. *An Apology* could be read as a *polyphonic text* written in dialogue across tenses and spaces, under Greek, Latin, French and Italian influence and conditioned by Sidney's experiences through travel and study.  
**Much more than a reply to Gosson: emphasis on the positive, constructive and profound critical discussion of poetry rather than a refutation of its attackers/maligners.**
  2. The text is symptomatic of a tension in the times – between the Puritans and the rise of individualism/ anthropocentrist view of the world as kindled in Elizabethan England by the Renaissance. Reading of the Bible and the classics – also the contact with new worlds and places, voyages of discovery, scientific and mathematical enquiries – unleashed a world of enquiry and uncertainties.
- ❑ The Press and its role in translation and dissemination of texts.
3. Remarkable that as late as 1581, Philip Sidney thought it necessary to write *An Apology for Poetry*; he writes as though the learned and respectable opinion of his time were hostile to poetry. The Muses, i.e. guardians of the creative arts, were considered as wantons.

## B. Locating the text in the matrix of assaults and defenses on poetry – Gosson and the puritan school of thought

Of Contemporaries first:

### 1. Who is Stephen Gosson?

- Stephen Gosson (1554-1624) was in the forefront of a Puritan assault upon the contemporary theatre.
- In 1579, he had published *The Schoole of Abuse, Containing a pleasaunt invective against Poets, Pipers, Plaiers, Jesters and suchlike Catterpillers of a Commonwealth*. He dedicated it to Sir Philip Sidney.
- In various pamphlets, Gosson attacks tragedies for their criminal subject matter, and comedies because their groundwork is “love, cozenage, flattery, bawdry, sly conveyance of whoredom” and their characters are “cooks, queans, knaves, bawds, parasites” and the like.

# Locating the text in the matrix of assaults and defenses on poetry – English predecessors and contemporaries aligned to the defence of poetry

2. The first response to Gosson's *Schoole of Abuse* came from Thomas Lodge (1558-1625) in *Defence of Poetry* (1579), an irritable outburst, abounding in lively invective. Lodge insists:

“I reason not that all poets are holy, but I affirm that poetry is a heavenly gift, a perfit gift, than which I know not greater pleasure”.

Edmund Spenser (1552-1599) mentioned *The Schoole of Abuse* in a letter to Gabriel Harvey in October 1579. They were all in dialogue and the texts could be perceived as arguments in a debate.

3. A main problem/ site of crucial engagement for the Renaissance critic and theorist is **defending imaginative literature (why?) which was being attacked on moral and social grounds.**

- Critics of the time slanted towards citing poetry as a source of moral instruction, e.g. Thomas Wilson's *Art of Rhetoric* (1553) and Roger Ascham's *Schoolmaster* (1570). Sidney like his immediate critical predecessors in England also begins by upholding that poetry instructs, that its purpose is moral and “it is consistent with correct religion”.

# Locating the text in the matrix of assaults and defenses on poetry – Sidney's European contemporaries

4. Sidney was not an isolated apologist for poetry in European terms. His account of the exalted role of poetry in the history of culture derives from [Antonio Minturno's \*De Poeta\* \(1559\)](#), one of a series of sixteenth century books which revisited the critical investigations of Aristotle and Horace.
  - Literary theory and criticism received a new emphasis in Italy, crucially due to the rediscovery and rising popularity of Aristotle's *Poetics* in sixteenth century Italy, unknown previously and preserved in abridged Arabic versions. In Venice in 1498, we have the first Latin translation of the whole text, a fresh impetus to critical activity in Italy.
5. Sidney's text is also deeply influenced by the [the French Scholar Julius Caesar Scaliger's \(1485-1558\) \*Poetics\* \(1570\)](#), his commentary on Aristotle's sketches on tragedy, drama, literature and history. [Scaliger was "the first to regard Aristotle as the perpetual lawgiver of poetry"](#) (J. E. Spingarn, *A History of Literary Criticism*).
6. We can read Sidney's text today as an investigation/meditation on the functions, relevance and propriety ( [Auchitya, Kshemendragupta](#) ) of poetry for a polity, as well as a creative commentary or *bhasya* on Aristotle's *Poetics*. It is an adaptation of Aristotelian theory, making poetry a union of philosophy and history and thus the highest source of wisdom after the scriptures. Like Aristotle, Sidney terms poesis "an art of imitation" in the sense of "a representing, counterfeiting or figuring forth".

# Life of Philip Sidney (1554-1586): a few points

1. Son of Sir Henry Sidney by the Lady Mary his wife, eldest daughter of John Dudley, Duke of Northumberland, born in November 1554
2. Alumnus of Shrewsbury School and Oxford
3. On May 25, 1572, the Queen grants Philip Sidney license to go abroad with three servants and four horses. He left London the day after in the train of the Earl of Lincoln, Ambassador to the French King.
4. He soon left Paris and journeyed via Heidelberg to Frankfurt (nine month stay); together with Hubert Languet, he then goes to Vienna and Hungary and spends eight months on his own thereafter in Italy, chiefly at Venice, Padua and Genoa. Back to England via Vienna on May 31, 1575. (Supposed to have first seen 'Stella', Penelope the daughter of Lord Essex, around this time; the sonnets of *Astrophel and Stella* go on for the next five or six years).
5. Gets acquainted to Edmund Spenser through Gabriel Harvey around 1578-79. Spenser mentions Sidney and his opinion of the *School of Abuse* in October 1579.
6. Most of the pastoral *Arcadia* written in 1580. Knighted on January 8, 1583; also Member of Parliament in 1581 and 1584-85. *Defense of Poesy* composed around this period (c. 1583?), though not published till 1595 by two different printers, Olney and Posonby. The former gave it the title *An Apologie for Poetrie*; the latter, *The Defence of Poesie*. Giordano Bruno entered Sidney's intimate circle of friends around 1583; he might have kindled Sidney's comparison of the doctrines of Platonism and neoPlatonism.
7. Appointed Governor of Flushing on Nov. 16, 1585; died of a wound received at the battle of Zutphen, September 1586.

Structure and Arguments in Sidney's *Apology* - a comparative, intertextual, interdisciplinary study (an examination of the art of poetry & a critical discussion of contemporary English poetry)

- ✓ 1. Poetry the **earliest** discipline; all others, including philosophy and history, **derive** from it.
- ✓ 2. Honorable names bestowed on poets; **the poet as prophet/seer and creator**
- ✓ 3. **Definition (poetry as imitation or representation)** and **divisions/subdivisions** of poetry – Religious, didactic, creative
- ✓ 4. **End of Creative poetry** and a discussion of this domain, **its ethics, aesthetics/appeal and telos as compared with History and Philosophy**
- ✓ 5. Subdivisions of creative poetry [First summary]
- ✓ 6. **Objections** against poetry laid down and refuted [Second Summary]
- ✓ 7. A assessment of contemporary English poetry , also **principles that should be observed in tragedy and comedy** [Third Summary]

# Contribution of Sidney's *Apology*

- Turns moral content into an indispensable condition of poetry, applies the Renaissance doctrine of ideality to creative poetry (its function to improve upon nature and kindle in man the promise of perfection, or a hunger for alternative realities)
- *Apology* as a work of critical synthesis, a site of confluence and re-assessment of Plato's views and Aristotle's, though primarily a *bhasya* or adaptation of Aristotelian theory, making poetry a union of philosophy and history
- Reconciles Plato to his camp, turning Plato into a witness for poetry; according to Sidney, Plato warned men not against poetry, but against its abuse
- Transforms the concept of mimesis from a derivative category to one of creation or ideal imitation
- Shifts the tenor of the debate regarding the domain and function of poetry from *instruction* to *delight*
- Sets out to appease the censors of his time, but ends up being a theorist of the exuberant imagination – declares that poetry stands supreme in its own right and crowns poetry with the power to *move*. In this he anticipates the Romantics.