

How does Philip Sidney defend poetry in his essay “Apology for Poetry”?

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Philip Sidney defends poetry in his essay “Apology for Poetry” from the accusations made by Stephen Gosson in his “School of Abuse” dedicated to him. There, Gosson makes some objections against poetry. Sidney replies to the objections made by Gosson very emphatically, defending poetry in his essay. Sidney does this in a very logical and scholarly way.

The major objections against poetry are: (a) “that there being many other more fruitful knowledges, a man might better spend his time in them then 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 rightly banished poets from his ideal republic.

Sidney’s replies to these objections:

(a) Defending poetry against the first charge, he says that man can’t employ his time more usefully than in poetry. He says that “no learning is so good as that teacheth and moveth to virtue, and that none can both teach virtue, and thereto as much as poetry”.

(b) 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 poet creates something by emotion or imagination against which no charge of lying can be brought. The astronomer, the geometrician, the historian and others, all make false statements. But poet “nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth”, his end being “to tell not what is or what is not, but what should or should not be”. The question of truth or falsehood would arise only when a person insists on telling a fact. The poet does not present fact but fiction embodying truth of an ideal kind.

(c) The third objection against poetry that it is the nurse of abuse, “infecting us with many pestilent desires or wits” may be partly justified, but for this a particular poet may be blamed but not poetry. To this charge, Sidney replies that poetry does not abuse man’s wit but it is man’s wit that abuses poetry. All arts and sciences misused had evil effects, but that did not mean that they were less valuable when rightly employed. Abuse of poetry, according to Sidney, is not the problem of poetry but of the poet.

(d) The fourth objection that Plato had rightly banished the poets from his ideal republic is also not tenable because Plato sought to banish the amoral poets of his time, and not poetry itself. Plato himself believed that poetry is divinely inspired. In “Ion”, Plato gives high and rightly divine commendation to poetry. His description of the poet as “a light-winged and sacred thing” reveals his attitude to poetry. Sidney concludes, “So as Plato banishing the abuse, not the ‘Thing’, not banishing it, but giving due honour unto it, shall be our patron and not adversary”.

In this way, Sidney very strongly defends poetry against the accusations made by Stephen Gosson on poetry.

Superiority of poetry over history and philosophy:

In the promotion of virtue, both philosophy and history play their parts. Philosophy deals with its theoretical aspects and teaches virtue by precepts. History teaches practical virtue by drawing concrete examples from life. But poetry gives both practical and precepts examples. Philosophy, being based on abstractions, is "heard of utterance and mystery to be conceived." It cannot be a proper guide for youth. On the other hand, the historian is tied to empirical facts that his example draws no necessary consequence. Poetry gives perfect pictures of virtue which are far more effective than the mere definitions of philosophy. It also gives imaginary examples which are more instructive than the real examples of history. The reward of virtue and the punishment of vice is more clearly shown in poetry than in history. Poetry is superior to philosophy in the sense that it has the power to move and to give incentive for virtuous action. It presents moral lessons in a very attractive manner. Things which in themselves are horrible as cruel battles, monsters are made delightful in poetic imitation. Poet is therefore the monarch of all knowledge. "For he doth(does) not only show the way but giveth(gives) so sweet a prospect into the way as will entice any man to enter into it."

The poet does not begin with obscure definitions which load the memory with doubtfulness, "but he cometh(comes) to you with words set in delightful proportion, either accompanied with or prepared for the well-enchanting skill of music and with a tale for suit he cometh unto you, with a tale which holdeth(holds) children from play and old man from the chimney corner. And pretending no more, doth intend the winning of the mind from wickedness to virtue."