Y Myfyriwr Ymchwil
Cyfrol 3, Rhif 2, Mai 2015, 51–56

Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant

The Student Researcher
Vol. 3, No. 2, May 2015, 51–56

University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

'To Lift up the Mind': Sidney's *Defence of Poesy* and the Place and Purpose for Poetry among other Disciplines of Knowledge

Yelyzaveta Meagher

Level 5, BA (Hons) Philosophy and English

Crynodeb

Ysgrifennwyd *Defence of Poesy* Sidney ar adeg pan oedd barddoniaeth dan gabl gan feirniaid Dadeni Lloegr. Yn ei ymgais i adfer barddoniaeth yn ffurf ac yn ddull o addysgu, defnyddia nifer o ddadleuon sy'n dibynnu ar ysgolheigion ac ysgrifenwyr eraill i ategu ei ddatganiadau. Mae *The Defence of Poesy* wedi'i rannu'n ddwy ran, y naill yn canolbwyntio ar werth athroniaeth, hanes a barddoniaeth yn ffurf o ennill gwybodaeth a rhinwedd, a'r llall ar y rhesymau dros ddirmygu barddoniaeth yn Lloegr y Dadeni. Canolbwyntia'r traethawd hwn ar y rhan gyntaf, gan astudio dadleuon Sidney o blaid prif amcan barddoniaeth a'i lle ymhlith disgyblaethau eraill, gan sylwi'n arbennig ar: amddiffyn barddoniaeth yn broffwydoliaeth, cwmpas eclectig yr amddiffyniad, a rôl athroniaethau Platon ac Aristotlys yn y gwaith.

Geiriau allweddol: Sidney, barddoniaeth, Dadeni, athroniaeth, rhinwedd

Abstract

Sidney's *Defence of Poesy* was written at a time when poetry was looked down upon by critics in the English Renaissance. In his attempt to revive poetry as a genre and a mode of teaching, he makes use of many arguments relying on other scholars and writers to support his statements. *The Defence of Poesy* is divided into two parts, with the first part focusing on the values of philosophy, history and poetry as a means of deriving knowledge and virtue, while the second part is focused on the reasons for contempt towards poetry in Renaissance England. This essay focuses on the first part, examining Sidney's arguments for poetry's supreme purpose and place among other disciplines, paying particular attention to: the defence of poetry as prophecy, the eclectic scope of the defence, and the role of Plato's and Aristotle's philosophies in the work.

Key words: Sidney, poetry, Renaissance, philosophy, virtue

Sir Philip Sidney's *Defence of Poesy* was written at a time when poetry was looked down upon by critics in the English Renaissance. In his attempt to revive poetry as a genre and a mode of teaching, he invokes many arguments relying on other scholars and writers to support his statements. The *Defence of Poesy* is divided into two parts, with the first part focusing on the values of philosophy, history and poetry as a form of deriving knowledge and virtue, while the second part is focused on the reasons for contempt towards poetry in Renaissance England. The essay is going to focus on the first part, examining Sidney's arguments for poetry's supreme purpose and place among other disciplines, paying particular attention to the defence of poetry as prophecy, the eclectic scope of the defence and the role of Plato's and Aristotle's philosophies in the work.

In the opening of his defence, Sidney says he has 'slipped into the title of a poet', suggesting that poetry is a calling, rather than a mere profession, and that he is 'provoked' to say something to defend his 'unelected profession'.[1] This is the first suggestion in the text of Sidney's attribution of a prophetic value to a poet, as most prophets do not choose to prophesise, but rather it is their calling from a divine force.[2] Sidney can be understood as saying that poetry itself is a form of a divine calling, which is reemphasized later in the defence when Sidney states that he never desired the title of poet and his defence came out as a result of being 'overmastered by some thoughts'.[3]

As a first line of defence, Sidney argues that poetry, in all 'noblest nations and languages' has been 'the first light-giver to ignorance' and has 'little by little enabled them to feed afterwards of tougher knowledges'.[4] He uses ancient Greece as an example of a culture that started with poetry through the writings of Musaeus, Homer and Hesiod, and continued through the works of Orpheus and Linus who were the first to use pens as 'deliverers of their knowledge'. This is the first instance in the work when Sidney draws a parallel between knowledge and poetry. He invokes the names of Italian poets Dante, Boccaccio and Petrarch who aspired for poetry 'to be a treasure-house of science' and English Gower and Chaucer as the poets who motivated others 'to beautify our mother tongue'. Primarily Sidney illustrates that in 'venerable' antiquity it was the art of writing that is found as the first form of bringing knowledge.[5] Using the honourable names of first deliverers of knowledge, Sidney builds up a claim that poetry should be respected.

Next Sidney moves on to talk about Greek philosophers, as they appeared 'to the world but under the masks of poets', and states that in Plato's works 'the inside and the strength were philosophy, the skin, as it were, and the beauty depended most of poetry'. He states the same is true of historiographers, who 'have been glad to borrow both fashion, and perchance, weight of the poets'. Sidney concludes that neither philosophers nor historiographers would have become known and considered, had they not taken 'a great passport of poetry' as their primary form of delivery. This reiterates Sidney's introduction of the idea of the venerable status of poetry, which is followed by a closer examination of the ancients, calling the Romans and the Greeks 'the authors of most of our sciences'.[6]

He continues with a statement that the Romans called poets *vates* – 'a diviner, foreseer, or prophet'; Invoking 'the oracles of Delphos and Sibylla's prophecies' delivering through verse, and calling David's Psalms 'a divine poem'.[7] This draws a clear parallel between the poet's message and that of divine prophecy. It was peculiar at the time that Sidney drew such a connection, considering the negative perception of prophecy in the late sixteenth century.[8] However, Sidney restates his point when

he says that if one looks 'deeper into it', one shall find 'the end and working of it as such, being rightly applied, deserveth not to be scourged out of the church of God'.[9] He suggests that a 'poet reveals the divine truths to sinful humanity and leads them to moral and spiritual renewal'.[10] Examining the etymology of the word poet, Sidney instructs the reader that it comes from the Greek *poiein*, which meant 'to make'. This point is significant as in the Renaissance a poet was referred to as 'the maker';[11] for Sidney, a divine maker.

Next follows the nature aspect of poetry, as well as the beginning of an analysis of other sciences. Sidney suggests that no artist is able to deliver his knowledge without having 'the works of nature for his principal object'. He examines the scope of an astronomer, a musician, a natural philosopher, and others, finishing with metaphysics, saying that each one of them is tied, in one way or another to reflect 'what nature will have set forth'. 'Only the poet', Sidney says, 'disdaining to be tied to any such subjection, lifted up with the vigour of his own invention, doth grow in effect another nature'. The poet forms things which never existed in nature, such as Chimeras and Demigods. Sidney suggests that only the poet 'may make the too much loved earth more lovely', concluding that 'her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden'.[12] This passage is reminiscent of Julius Caesar Scaliger's passage from *Poetices*, where he sets out to distinguish poetry from philosophy, oratory and history. Scaliger's conclusion being that while historians and philosophers 'represented things just as they are, … the poets depict quite another sort of nature', hence the title of 'a maker' by the Greeks.[13] Scaliger states that poets depict a different kind of nature, while Sidney creates a metaphor of poetry as a golden world; poetry as a microcosm (an idea traced back to late Neo-Platonists),[14] to show how it contributes to the macrocosm. In the next passage Sidney states that a poet 'bringeth things forth, surpassing her [nature's] doings' 'with the force of a divine breath',[15] calling a poet a maker of 'the heavenly Maker'. Once again he recounts the prophetic nature of a poet, strengthened by reference to the poetic freedom in comparison with other sciences, and bringing forth the hermeneutic scope of poetry.[16]

Next is a very formal definition of poetry as 'an art of imitation' from Aristotle's term *mimesis*. Poetry represents and counterfeits with an aim 'to teach and delight'. Calling poetry 'a speaking picture'[17], Sidney restates Horace's point from *Ars Poetica*.[18] He examines the three types of poesy. Poetry of imitation – as are the works of David and Solomon; poetry of philosophy, or astronomy, or history; and finally, the true poetry 'which most properly [does] imitate to teach and delight', 'borrow[s] nothing of what is, has been, or shall be; but range[s], only reined with learned discretion, into the divine consideration of what may be or should be'. Sidney starts examining the right kind of a poet, suggesting once again their prophetic nature. His poet is not necessarily a versifier, but rather the one who combines 'notable images of virtues, vices, […] with that delightful teaching'. Unlike Scaliger, who does not make it clear why poetic knowledge is more significant than that of a philosopher or an historian,[19] Sidney delves into this point as he strives to lift poetry above other sciences:

> This purifying of wit – this enriching of memory, enabling of judgement, and enlarging of conceit – which commonly we call learning, under what name soever it comes forth, or to what immediate end soever it be directed, the final end is to lead and draw us to as high a perfection as our degenerate souls, made worse by their clayey lodgings, can be capable of.[20]

University of Wales Trinity Saint David

Poetry encompasses the ultimate end of knowledge; its goal is to draw us as close to Aristotelian virtue as our souls are capable of. Its means is 'by knowledge to lift up the mind from the dungeon of the body to the enjoying his own divine essence'.[21] This sentence is reminiscent of the Buddhist notion of attaining nirvana, however, Sidney believes that the way to discover and achieve our divine essence is through poetry. Why it is poetry that is best fitted for this goal is shown in the next few passages of the defence.

What follows in the defence is an attempt to set a poet above his other competitors in acquiring knowledge and virtue – philosophy and history. The end goal of philosophical teachings is for Sidney similar to Plato's *The Republic*, with its aim of showing a man how he fits in 'the government of families and maintaining of public societies'. The historian in turn is critical of a philosopher, saying that 'his virtue is excellent in the dangerless Academy of Plato' and 'he teaches virtue by certain abstract considerations', while a historian gives 'the experience of many ages'. Combined, a philosopher is a guide, and an historian is a light, 'the one giveth the precept, and the other the example'. All this seems well, however, Sidney believes that there needs be a 'moderator' between the two extremes – the poet – and that, if we compare all three, we shall see that 'no other human skill can match him'.[22]

A Philosopher's fault lies in the abstractness and generalness of his knowledge. He is so difficult to understand that 'happy is that man that may understand him, and more happy that can apply what he doth understand'. On the other hand, an historian, wanting the philosopher's precept, 'is so tied, not to what should be, but to what is, […] not to the general reason of things, that his example draweth no necessary consequence, and therefore a less fruitful doctrine'. Clearly, philosophy has a venerable position for Sidney, yet its teachings are useless if they be not understood. Similarly, an historian may well be easier to comprehend; nevertheless he is always tied to facts which he cannot escape. What, then, is so special about poetry: the perfect moderator and mediator? The 'peerless poet performs both: for whatsoever the philosopher saith should be done, he giveth a perfect picture of it […] coupleth the general notion with the particular example'. Poesy illuminates the teachings of philosophy in a way that is comprehensible and, unlike history, it is not tied down to following 'the footing of them that have gone before you'. It is true that poets were banned from Plato's perfect commonwealth, yet Sidney states that it was not for 'the fault of the art', rather because very few men can be the right kind of poet. Sidney says 'the philosopher teacheth, but he teacheth obscurely' and only those who are already learned can understand his knowledge, 'but [poetry] is the food for the tenderest stomachs'. Following on Aristotle's *On the Art of Poetry*, Sidney says that 'poesy dealeth with […] the universal consideration, and the history with […] the particular'. The historian is not at liberty to tell of the causes of many things, unless he betrays history. Yet for the poet, 'his imitation make his own, beautifying it both for further teaching, and more delighting, as it please him'.[23] This is why poetry is above all sciences. Through its accessible teachings, poetry shows the moral truth of philosophy and is not tied down to facts as history is.

Sidney builds on the Aristotelian concept of organicism.[24] He follows Aristotle's ideas on poetry's form and function, yet he follows Plato in arguing for the value in assuming an ethical purpose to poetry.[25] A poet's powerful wit goes beyond nature, exploring imagination. The golden world of a 'right' poet is a well thought-through imitation, counterfeiting and bringing forth of the Maker's ideal world, the macrocosm, the world as it ought to be. Sidney's *Defence of Poesy* is a well-structured

piece of writing, which successfully illustrates poetry's particular place among other disciplines.

Bibliography

Duncan-Jones, Katherine, 'Notes to The Defence of Poesy', in *The Major Works*, Katherine Duncan-Jones (ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008

Krouse, Michael, F. (1954). 'Plato and Sidney's Defence of Poesie', *Comparative Literature*, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 138–147

Roger E. Moore (2010). 'Sir Philip Sidney's Defense of Prophesying', *SEL Studies in English Literature 1500–1900*, vol. 50, no. 1, 35–62

Sidney, Philip, Sir, 'The Defence of Poesy', in *The Major Works*, Katherine Duncan-Jones (ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008

Stillman, Robert, E. (2002). 'The Scope of Sidney's Defence of Poesy: The New Hermeneutic and Early Modern Poetics', *English Literary Renaissance*, vol. 32, no. 3, pp. 355–385

Horace, *The Poetic Art: A Translation of Horace's Ars Poetica.* Translated by C. H. Sisson. Cheadle: Carcanet Press, 1975

Notes

1 Sir Philip Sidney, 'The Defence of Poesy', in *The Major Works*, Katherine Duncan-Jones (ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 212.
2 Roger E. Moore (2010). 'Sir Philip Sidney's Defense of Prophesying', *SEL Studies in English Literature 1500–1900*, vol. 50, no. 1, 35–62 (p. 47).
3 Ibid., p. 47.
4 Sidney, op. cit., p. 213.
5 Sidney, op. cit., p. 213.
6 Sidney, op. cit., pp. 213–214.
7 Sidney, op. cit., pp. 214–215.
8 Moore, op. cit., p. 36.
9 Sidney, op. cit., p. 215.
10 Moore, op, cit., p. 36
11 Katherine Duncan-Jones, 'Notes to The Defence of Poesy', in *The Major Works*, Katherine Duncan-Jones (ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 374.
12 Sidney, op. cit., p. 215.
13 Robert E. Stillman (2002). 'The Scope of Sidney's Defence of Poesy: The New Hermeneutic and Early Modern Poetics', *English Literary Renaissance*, vol. 32, no. 3, pp. 355–385 (p. 371).
14 Ibid., p. 372.
15 Sidney, op. cit., p. 215.
16 Stillman, op. cit., p. 375.
17 Sidney, op. cit., p. 215.
18 Horace, *The Poetic Art: A Translation of Horace's Ars Poetica.* Translated by C. H. Sisson. Cheadle: Carcanet Press, 1975.
19 Stillman, op. cit., p. 375.
20 Sidney, op. cit., p. 219.
21 Sidney, op. cit., p. 219.
22 Sidney, op. cit., pp. 220–221.
23 Sidney, op. cit., pp. 222–225.
24 Stillman, op. cit., p. 373
25 F. Michael Krouse (1954). 'Plato and Sidney's Defence of Poesie', *Comparative Literature*, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 138–147 (p. 140).

University of Wales Trinity Saint David