

PHILIP SIDNEY

AN APOLOGY FOR POETRY: QUESTIONS WITH ANSWERS

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An answer key is provided at the end of this handout (p. 8).

Text used: Charles Kaplan and William David Anderson, eds. Criticism: Major Statements, 4th ed. New York: Bedford, 2000.

I. PHILIP SIDNEY (1554-1586)

1. With his long essay An Apology for Poetry, Sir Philip Sidney virtually inaugurated modern English literary criticism.

2. Here “Apology” means a “defense” of poetry, not that Sidney is sorry about writing poetry.

3. Sidney wrote this essay to defend literature from the attacks of Puritan religious leaders in England, particularly one Anglican parson Stephen Gosson, who in 1579 had published a pamphlet titled The School of Abuse, which attacked literature, plays, actors, and the audience of plays.

4. Gosson berates all writers of fiction and drama as enemies of virtue, connects literature with paganism and Roman Catholicism, and contends literary works divert people from spiritual considerations by dwelling on sensual and worldly pleasures.

5. This pamphlet was dedicated to Sidney without Sidney’s permission. Thus Sidney, who, in between soldiering, was at the time engaged in writing his sonnets and his romance Arcadia, felt obliged to answer.

6. Sidney’s defense of poetry was circulated in manuscript form in 1583. It was not published until 1595 and then under two names: An Apology for Poetry and The Defense of Poetry. The text of the Apology is superior.

7. It influenced Ben Jonson and to a lesser degree Shakespeare. Later Percy Bysshe Shelley derived material from it for his essay The Defense of Poetry.

8. Sidney has excellent taste in poetry, as in his high praise of Chaucer’s Troilus and Criseyde and the popular ballads.

II. AN APOLOGY FOR POETRY

A. ANTIQUITY OF POETRY

1. Sidney opens by stating that he is writing this treatise to support the return of poetry to the eminence to which ancient (Biblical/classical) writers had raised it (Kaplan and Anderson 102).

2. How does he use the earliest philosophers (102-03), historians (103), and the Bible (104) to bolster this claim?

Poets were “the first light-giver to _____” (102). The earliest Greek writers such as Homer were poets. The “_____ of Greece” wrote “under the masks of _____” (103). The beauty of Plato’s philosophical works “depended most on _____” (103). Early historians such as Herodotus used poetic devices (103). The “holy David _____ are a divine poem” (104).

3. To the Romans, he writes, the poet was a “_____ (in Latin *vates*)” (104). In ancient Greek, Sidney states the word poet meant “_____” (105).

B. DEFINITIONS OF POETRY AND THE MIMETIC THEORY

1. Having established how all societies have honored the poet, Sidney next sets out to define poetry. “There is no art delivered to mankind that hath not the works of _____ for its principal object” (105).

2. However, the poet differs from others who strictly imitate and represent Nature truthfully. List these seven strict imitators of Nature given by Sidney and their area of representing the world outside of a person’s mind (105).

- (1) Astronomer – the _____.
- (2) Geometrician and arithmetician – quantities or _____.
- (3) Musician – “times” (by which Sidney means _____).
- (4) _____ – legal determinations.
- (5) _____ – past events.
- (6) Grammarian – the nature of speech.
- (7) _____ – the nature of the human body.

3. In one of the most famous passages from the essay, Sidney states that the poet, unlike these strict imitators, is not bound by truth and can make things better than they are.

The poet, “lifted up with the vigour of his own invention,” creates “another _____,” either “_____ than Nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as _____ were in Nature” (105).

4. Sidney asserts that the world of nature is “_____” (that is, like crude brass), but the poet makes it “_____” (106).

5. According to Sidney, the inspired poet perceives the ideal (“that _____ or foreconceit of the work”) (106) behind the transient and tawdry. Poetic fiction therefore presents the highest universal truth—“what _____ is” (106).

6. On the next page, Sidney clarifies how the poet, contrary to what Plato argued, goes to the ideal reality of God, which is imitated in the poet’s poems. He writes that in imitation, the poet will “borrow nothing of what is, hath been, or shall be; but range . . . into the _____ consideration of what _____ be, and _____ be” (107).

7. Having established this conception of the poet, Sidney gives his first definition of poetry, combining ideas from Aristotle and Horace: Poetry imitates but does not simply copy nature (Aristotle), and its function is to teach and delight (Horace): “Poetry therefore is an art of _____, for so _____ termed it in his word Mimesis . . . with the end, to _____ and _____” (106).

8. Sidney’s second definition flows from his point that versification and rhyme are not the distinguishing marks of poetry, since many great poets never used these devices. Thus prose writers can be considered as poets, and all imaginative writing is poetry (107):

It “is not _____ or versing that maketh a poet.” “But it is that feigning notable _____ of _____, _____ . . . with that delightful _____” that defines poetry (107-08).

9. This second definition, which states that poetry presents “images of virtues” and “vices,” relates poetry to morality: Poetry must be moral. The “final _____ [of poetry] is to lead and draw us to as high a _____ as our degenerate souls . . . can be capable of” (108) and (as Sidney states later) to win “the mind from _____ to _____” (115).

10. In leading one to the moral life, Sidney contends that _____ is a better teacher than philosophy or history, the main subject of the next section of the essay.

C. HISTORY, PHILOSOPHY, AND POETRY

1. Deeming the great end of all learning to be the living of a virtuous life, Sidney declares that poetry simultaneously links the benefits of history and philosophy, termed poetry’s “other _____” (108).

2. Sidney concludes that the poet “couplet [joins] the _____ notion [of the philosopher] with the _____ example [of the historian]” (110). In being able to do both of these, the poet is “victorious, not only of the _____, but over the _____” (114).

3. How is poetry superior to history? (109-10, 112-13, 122) Consider particularly history's haphazardness; its concentration on examples and particulars, not the ideal; Sidney's citation of Aristotle's comment on the relationship of history and poetry; and the "many lies" which Sidney says a historian tells.

History consists of "old _____-eaten records" (109) It is built on "hearsay" (109) and is more concerned with the past than "with the _____ age" (109).

The historian is concerned with "What _____," not "what _____ be" (110). He deals with particulars and examples, not generalities, and consequence (110).

Aristotle said poetry is more philosophical than history (112).

Historians encourage "unbridled _____" (113) and, Sidney argues later, because they deal with so many particulars they can "hardly _____ from [recording] many lies" (122).

4. How is poetry superior to philosophy? (109, 110-11) Consider particularly philosophy's dull universals, precepts, and abstractions and its difficulty.

Philosophy teaches virtue by dull abstraction (109), that is, by precept (logical deduction): Philosophy "giveth the _____" and the historian gives "the _____" (110).

Philosophy is difficult to understand: "The philosopher showeth you the way [to understanding] . . . as well as the _____ of the way" (110). Its reasoning is filled with "_____ definitions" (111).

5. In one of the most often quoted passages from the essay, Sidney vividly stresses the power which poetry has over people: "A [literary] tale . . . holdeth children from _____, and old men from the _____ corner" (115). Why are these examples so powerful?

Typically, more than anything else _____ love to go outside to play. In the same way, _____ men like to retire to the warmth of a chimney corner. However much they delight in these pleasures, they abandon them when a story is about to be narrated.

D. GENRES OF POETRY

1. Here Sidney points out how certain genres of literature improve the morality of the reader or viewer. (Not all of Sidney's list of genres are discussed.)

2. Copy his comments on the Satiric (117), the Comic (117), and Tragedy (118).

(a) Satiric – Makes people "laugh at _____," thus convincing them to "_____ it (117).

(b) Comic – imitates the "common _____ of our life" (117), again making people want to avoid them.

(c) Tragedy – It opens “the greatest _____” and teaches kings not to be “_____” (118) while reminding others of “the _____ of this world” (118).

E. SUMMARY OF THE FIRST PART OF THE ESSAY

1. Sidney pauses here to summarize the major points about the nature and importance of poetry which he has made in the first part of the essay.

2. Copy his comments about (a) the antiquity of poetry, (b) what poetry imitates, (c) the morality of poetry, (d) the effects of poetry, and (e) how poetry is superior to both philosophy and history (120).

(a) Antiquity – “Poetry is of all human learning the most _____” (120). It is “so _____ that no learned nation” despises it (120). Greeks and Romans “gave _____ names” to it, the one of “prophesying” and the other of “_____” (120).

(b) What poetry imitates – The poet does not just imitate nature, but creates his own subject matter: Of all writers, the “poet only bringeth his own _____, and doth not learn a conceit out of a matter, but _____ matter for a conceit” (120).

(c) Morality of poetry – The poet never advances “evil,” but teaches goodness: His poems do not contain “any _____” (120), that is, evil which goes unpunished.

(d) Effect of poetry – The poet’s aims are “to _____ and to _____” his readers (120).

(e) Superiority of Poetry – Because of these two goals, “in _____ doctrine (the chief of all knowledges)” the poet “far passes [surpasses] the _____” and is “comparable to the _____,” and in some ways even better than him since a poem moves or excites its reader better than a philosophical work.

3. Having established poetry’s noble heritage and how it benefits humanity, Sidney is ready to address the specific slurs which have been made against poetry.

F. OBJECTIONS TO POETRY

1. Sidney particularly blamed poets themselves for the ill repute of their art. He deals with five objections to poetry:

2. Some contend that poetry is simply singsong play. How does Sidney answer this charge?

Poetry is not just “_____ and versing” (121). However, even with that limiting view, rhyme and verse help a person remember.

3. Some contend that poetry is a useless time-consumer (121). What is Sidney’s answer? (122)

Sidney counters that poetry is supremely conducive to virtue. Poetry better “teacheth and moveth to _____” (122) than any other way of learning.

4. Others contend that the poet is a liar. How does Sidney counter this charge?

In this famous passage (122), Sidney begins by frankly admitting that a poet does not tell the truth; however, he adds, the poet never says he is going to tell the truth (overt reality):

“Now, for the poet, he _____ affirms, and therefore never _____. For, as I take it, to lie is to affirm that to be true which is false; . . . But the poet (as I said before) _____ affirmeth. The poet never maketh any circles about your imagination, to conjure you to believe for _____ what he writes” (122).

In fact, Sidney claims that the purpose of the poet is “_____ . . . to tell you what is, or is not, but what _____ or _____ be. And therefore, though he recount things not true, yet because he telleth them _____ for _____, he _____” (122).

5. Some critics contend that poetry tends to teach people about sin and weakens and softens the martial spirit, thereby encouraging these vices. Sidney concedes that there is immoral poetry, which is “am_____” and deals with “lu_____,” “va_____,” and “scu_____ [vulgar language]” (123). [I give the initial letters to the word that will fill in the blank in order to assist you in finding it.]

Sidney points out that the abuses of poetry prove not the deficiencies of poetry but the limitations of inferior poets: Poetry does not “abuseth _____ wit, but that man’s wit _____” (123).

He gives the examples of good and bad doctors, _____, and theologians (123-24).

To counter that poetry softens the martial spirit, Sidney cites examples of great military leaders, such as _____ the Great, who took poetry books into battle, the reading of which inspired them to courageous actions.

6. The fifth objection is the hardest to deal with, Sidney admits: That Plato banned poets from his ideal state in the Republic. How does Sidney counter this charge? (125-26)

Sidney claims that it was not _____ poetry that Plato opposed, but the inadequate and false statements by bad _____. Plato meant to drive out only those wrong opinions of the Deity “_____ by” certain poets (125).

Sidney lists great philosophers who wrote poetry including Socrates, and notes how in The Ion Socrates said that poetic inspiration has a _____ source (126).

7. Sidney partially summarizes his answers to the objections about poetry. He writes that poetry is “not” “an art of _____, but of true doctrine.” It does not promote “effeminate,” but a “notable stirring of _____.” Poetry is not engaged in “_____ man’s wit, but” in “_____ man’s wit.” Poetry was “not _____, but _____ by Plato” (127). [NOTE: This last statement about Plato is inaccurate. In The Republic, Plato does regrettably banish poets from his ideal realm.]

G. CRITICISM OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

1. In the last section, Sidney gives his own critical appraisal of the poetry and drama of the time (127).

2. ENGLISH DRAMA: Unlike many of his learned and courtly contemporaries, Sidney recognized the preeminent position of the current English drama.

3. Tragedy, he stated, follows not the laws of history but the laws of poetry; hence the dramatist is free to violate absolute fact: "And do they not know that a Tragedy is tied to the _____ of _____, and not of _____; not bound to follow the story, but, having _____, either to feign [imitate] a quite _____ matter, or to frame the history to the most _____ conveniency?" (130)

4. In the following dramatic areas, what faults does Sidney find in English drama during his time?

(a) The unities of time and place: English drama typically violated those unities, Sidney states. He believed that "the stage should always represent but one _____" and "by Aristotle's precept" its action should not be more than "_____ day" (129).

(b) In medias res ("in the middle of things"; although the Latin term is not used by Sidney): He writes that dramas should not begin "from the _____" (that is, at the beginning) but "at the _____ point" of the action (130). Too often he found English dramas violated this concept.

(c) The mingling of comic and tragic elements: English dramas often mingle "kings and _____," producing a "_____ tragi-comedy." They "match hornpipes" [instruments for a comic dance] and "_____," which befit a tragedy (130).

H. SUMMARY OF THE ENTIRE ESSAY

1. Here Sidney summarizes the main points of his essay, first by again affirming his opinion that "poesy is full of _____-breeding _____" (134).

2. He continues that the "blames laid against it are either _____ or _____" and that the reason it is "not esteemed in _____ is the fault of poet-_____, not poets" (134).

3. He asks his readers no longer to "scorn" poetry and "laugh" at poets, but to regard them as they have been throughout antiquity: as revealers of Divinity, "first-bringers-in of all _____," conveyers of philosophy, and "beloved of the _____." True poets can make each person they write about "_____ by their verses" (134).

Answer Key

- II. A. 2. ignorance; philosophers; poets; poetry; Psalms.
3. prophet; maker.
- B. 1. Nature.
2. stars; numbers; sounds; Lawyer; Historian; Physician.
3. nature; better; never.
4. brazen; golden.
5. idea; perfection.
6. divine; may; should.
7. imitation; Aristotle; teach; delight.
8. rhyming; images; virtues; vices; teaching.
9. end; perfection; wickedness; virtue.
10. poetry.
- C. 1. competitors.
2. general; particular; historian; philosopher.
3. mouse; present; is; should; wickedness; escape.
4. precept; example; tediousness; obscure.
5. play; chimney; children; old.
- D. 2. (a) folly; avoid; (b) errors; (c) wounds; tyrants; uncertainty.
- E. 2. (a) ancient; universal; divine; making; (b) stuff; maketh; (c) evil; (d) teach; delight; (e) moral; historian; philosopher.
- F. 2. rhyming.
3. virtue.
4. nothing; lieth; never; true; not; should; should not; not; true; lieth not.
5. amorous; lust; vanity; scurrility; man's; abuseth; Poetry; lawyers; Alexander.
6. all; poets; nourished; divine.
7. lies; courage; abusing; strengthening; banished; honored.
- G. 3. laws; Poesy; History; liberty; new; tragical.
4. (a) place; one; (b) egg; principal; (c) clowns; mongrel; funerals.
- H. 1. virtue; delightfulness.
2. false; feeble; England; apes.
3. civility; gods; immortal.