

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/342466500>

An Analysis of Philip Sidney's Apology for Poetry

Article · June 2020

CITATIONS
0

READS
3,606

1 author:



Madhan Ponkoliyandi
Alagappa University

44 PUBLICATIONS 0 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

ISSN : 2319-9946

**LITERARY
EXPLORATIONS**

(A Quarterly International Refereed Journal)

September 2017

VOL : IV

NO:5

13. Literature and Film - R.Revathi 90
14. Platonism in Spenser's Poetry - Dr.P.Madhan, 93
15. Social Freedom and Psychological Wholeness as pictured
by Toni Morrison in *Beloved*: A Brief Analysis -
P.Aishwarya Vidhya 97
16. Identity of immigrants in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's
Select Novels: A Thematic Study – S. Sandhya &
Dr.M.Kannadhasan 102
17. A.K. Ramanujan Poems reflects Religious, Cultural and
other aspects of Man: A Thematic Study - G.Rajesh &
Dr.M.Kannadhasan 109
18. Social Realism in Bhabani Bhattacharya's "*So Many
Hungers!*" - B.Valliammal & Dr.M.Kannadhasan 116
19. History and Scientific Research in Amitav Ghosh's *The
Calcutta Chromosomes*- P.Bhavani & Dr.M.Kannadhasan 120
20. Naturalism in Robert Frost's *Nothing Cold Can Stay* and
P.B. Shelley's *Ode To The West Wind* - A. Mohan 124
21. Indian Oral Literature - R. Vidhya 132
22. Racial Consciousness: A Critique of Richard Wright's
Native Son - J. Rupa & K. Ravichandran 136
23. Images of Women in the Select Plays of Elmer Rice,
R.Rameshkumar, Dr.V. Nagarajan 141
24. Quest for Identity in *the Vine of Desire* and *Queen of
Dreams*, N.Rajeswari, Dr.A.Antonysamy 145
25. An Analysis of Philip Sidney's Apology for Poetry,
Dr.P.Madhan 161
26. Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel*: A Feminist Reading
- Dr. C. Ramya 168

AN ANALYSIS OF PHILIP SIDNEY'S APOLOGY FOR POETRY

Dr.P.Madhan, Associate Professor of English, Alagappa University,
Karaikudi.

ABSTRACT

This article proposes to scrutinize Philip Sidney's Apology for Poetry. When the history of western literary criticism is surveyed, it begins with Socrates and moves to Plato, Aristotle, Horace, Longinus and Quintilian with whom classical criticism comes to a halt. Then when the discussion moves to English literary criticism, it begins with Apology for Poetry by Sidney. Here in this first British literary critical piece, the warrior and man of writer attempts to safeguard the genre of poetry from the vehement of attack of Stephan Gossoon who is very critical of poetry and its functions. His arguments are in the line of Plato who has also said poets would be banished from his republic. Philip Sidney presents his powerful arguments in support of poetry and he tries extremely hard to prove that the genre of poetry is second to any other literary form in terms of its splendor and magnificence. He attempts to highlight how poetry has been effectively used as a medium at the hands of timeless geniuses for the communication of ideas and viewpoints. Through this, he states that poetry is superior to other branches of knowledge.

Key Words: History, Philosophy, Natural Science, Law, Superior, Tragedy ,
Comedy

The writer begins his critical treatise by making a reference to his visit of the court of Maximilian with his friend Edward Wotton. During this visit, he says that he happens to meet a person by name Pugaliano who was all praise and appreciation for his profession of horse rearing. Listening to him would make anyone from any field of human activity to excel well in their profession concerned. Philip Sidney is not exemption to it. Under his influence, Sidney looks at the pitiable condition of poetry and wants to safeguard the emince of it from critics who are unfairly critical of it. In his days, every one including children made

derogatory remarks on poetry. Sidney holds that poetry provides both enlightenment and entertainment. It does greater amount of good to people. It places people on the ethical, honest, righteous and upright path and so he adds that speaking against it is an act of thanklessness. He alludes to the fact that the first great writers of the ancient Greek such as Homer, Musaeus and Hesiod were all poets. The music of greek musicians like Amphion and Orpheus moved stony and beastly people. He also says that Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio were all poets.

In course of his discourse, he mentions the fact the ancient philosophers like Thales, Empedocles and Parmenides expressed their views only through poetry. Pythagoras when he came out with his findings on transmigration of soul registered it only in poetry. Phocylides' views on moral values, Tyrtaeus observation of Spartan war and Solon's perspective of Perfect state of Atlantis were all documented in poetry, Sidney argues. Even Historians drew matter and manner only from poetry. When they wrote history books they employed the stylistic devices usually employed by Poets. Herodotus, father of history recorded his viewpoints and ideas only in poetic form. Like poetic protagonists, real historical personages are also made to deliver long speeches.

Then Sidney points out how in different countries poets were considered differently. For example, in Turkey poets were considered to be on a par with divine persons. It is really surprising that Turks who are known as very brutal used to hold poets in high esteem. In Ireland, Arts was not given that much priority and poets unusually were honored. The barbarous west Indians also accorded top priority to poets. Then, Sidney gives an account of respect given to poets in Rome where the poets were called Vitas or Divine Persons. There prevailed a tradition under which reading of Virgil's Aeneid was believed to foretell the future of people. When readers take Virgil's Aeneid and randomly chooses a page and read the paragraphs and sentences they come across would indicate the course of their future. Having dwelt on this matter, Sidney goes on to establish poetry's superiority over other subjects. He says that All arts subjects including science have only nature as the subject matter of their study either

directly or indirectly. For example, Sidney says that Mathematics is concerned with the calculation of the size and shape of objects and things. Geometrician is preoccupied with the calculation of angles of things, whereas scientists like botanists and zoologists concentrate on the examination of flora and fauna and the anatomy of animals respectively. From the above analysis of different subjects and their functions, Sidney holds that they focus only on nature. But, Poetry is superior to all other subjects by being above nature. It creates characters that cannot be seen in real life. It often presents role model characters which remain as models to humanity. For example, Theagenes of Heliodorus' *Aethiopica* stands as a model of faithful love. Pylades of Sophocles' *Electra* remains as a model of friendship. Cyrus of Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* is presented as a perfect king. Virgil's Aeneas is a model of perfect manhood. These exemplary characters originate in the poet's vision or what Sidney calls the Poet's FORE CONCEIT. Just because they are imaginary, they can not be dismissed as worthless. For, if these poetic models are learned in the spirit in which they were created by the poet, many real Cyruses, Aeneases, Orlando etc may live in society and cleanse it. Aristotle's concept of poetry as the mimesis of life is endorsed by Sidney who says that poets offer speaking pictures.

Sidney then classifies poetry into three types: religious poetry, philosophical poetry and teach and delight poetry. Of these three types, Sidney prioritizes the third type of poetry which teaches and delights. He classifies Solomon's Song of Songs, David's Psalms as examples for the first type of poetry. In the second category, he brings the works of Tyrataeus, Phocylides and Cato. The third type of poetry contains morals, values and ethics. It plays a pivotal role in bringing about positive transformation and renaissance in society by purifying the minds of the masses. It places them on the right path. After expressing his preference for teaching and delighting poetry, he moves on to make a mention of compartmentalization of poetry into various types such as tragedy, comedy, lyric, ode and sonnet. He, at this point says that metre and rhyme are only the attire of poetry. Good sense is vital for poetry. The true quality of poetry is it should teach morals to people. It should do enormous

good to the humanity. When a literary piece does it, even if it is not in poetic form, it is worthy of being called poetry. After that, Sidney goes ahead to point out the merits and demerits of various various disciplines. Astronomy provides knowledge for the learners about celestial bodies. But it makes the learners unworldly. When they keep walking seeing upward, he humorously states that they may fall into a ditch. Similarly, mathematics with its strength of demonstration makes the learners' minds sharp. But it does not ennoble the students who may draw straight lines with crooked heart. He is critical of the age old concept of learning as well knowing. He is of the view that highest form of learning is well doing. After acquiring education, if one behaves well in society and makes others behave well by transforming them into cultured and civilized humans that is the fruit of education, argues Sidney. Then he refers to the lifestyle of philosophers who always revel in definitions and divisions and so on. They are always seen carrying books in their hands ,moving slowly and not moving with other. They think that society can be reformed by prescribing to them values and ethics which do not have life. Similarly Historians boast of their subject as the evidence of time, the light of truth, the life of memory, the master of life and the messenger of antiquity. Philosophers discuss the burning problems of society in a cool manner. They do not seem to be ready to face the heat of life. But the historian says that he derives wisdom from actual battles such as those at Marathon, Pharsalia and Agincourt. Using an image, the historian says that the philosopher puts only a song book in the learner's hands. The historian says that great senators like Brutus and Alphonsus of Arragon benefited by reading history books-the former is said to have read Polybius and the latter is believed to have cured by reading Livy. But Sidney says that historians' proofs and evidences are based only on surmises and hypotheses not on real records. Similarly when he turns his attention towards lawyers he says that people respect law only because of fear of punishment and nothing else. Anything based on fear psychosis can not be accepted at all in human society.

Sidney says that poetry supplies moving pictures which are more important than teaching and delighting. Poetry showcases moving pictures and striking facts . When the readers read poetry, they feel like their hearts being

pierced through. According to Sidney the true quality of great poetry is it should have indelible impression on the minds of the readers. Sidney says that even a third rate piece of poetry such as the French romance *Amadis de Gaule* teaches nice values such as courtesy, liberality and courage. Great poetry has a moving power which is lackin in philosophy. Aeneas carrying old Anchises on his back and Tumus preferring death to a life of dishonor –scenes like this move readers to tears. Even great philosophers like Plato and Boethius are devoid of this moving quality. Philosophers confine themselves only to arid discussions such as the relative merits of contemplative as opposed to an active life. Even hard boiled epicureans who are concerned with enjoyment are delighted by poetry and unconsciously accept the forms of goodness embedded in it, as if they taste a medicine of cherries. Sidney gives two proofs of the noblest effect of poetry. While Romans were quarrelling among them Menenius Agrippa quelled the disoreder and established peace by telling them a story about the decision of the different parts of the body to starve in order to humble the belly and their general suffering and final decision to co operate with one another. The other example is of Nathan the prophet who told a story about a lamb which was taken away from its master. This made David, who was guilty oof adultery and murder realize his sinfulness and return to God. These two examples provethat poetry could correct people.

Then he moves ahead to dwell on the function of tragic poetry. It, from his point of view, promotes values. When people read tragic poetry, they will become noble, majestic and dignified. Sidney is not opposed to the idea of the combination of tragedy and comedy. Then he speaks about pastoral poetry which deals with the sufferings of poor peasants at the hands of hard hearted lords and soldiers. Elegy is next discussed by the critic Sidney after which he takes the subject of comedy about which many charges are levied. But Sidney does not see any inherent evil in comedy. Echoing Aristotle, Sidney says that comedy exposes such common foibles and failings as Terence does through characters like the niggardly Demea, the crafty Davus, the flattering Gnatho, the vainglorious Thraso, etc. Some argue that the exposure of evil may corrupt good men. Sidney does not agree with this view. He says that

just as the student of geometry knows both the oblique and the straight line and the student of arithmetic both the odd and the even one has to know both good and evil in life. Vice serves as a foil to the beauty of virtue. Instead of admiring and emulating evil doers, people generally wish to see them punished for their evil deeds. Also, comedy opens the eyes of theatre goers to the sack of faults lying behind their backs. Thus comedy serves as a corrective.

Like Aristotle, Sidney is also of the view that Tragedy is superior to comedy as it deals with the great maladies afflicting mankind. It shows how brittle the glory of kings is. It makes tyrannical rulers aware of the prospect of downfall. Then Sidney deals with lyrical poetry which praises virtuous actions, expresses moral precepts, highlights human problems and sometimes lauds the immortal God. After that, the first literary critic of England sheds light on heroic poetry for which his admiration is remarkable. Later, he also unleashes attack on poetry haters who according to him attempt to attain recognition by means of their opposition to poetry. They indulge in pointless vituperation. Their retorts and scoffs have no element of truth and can be coolly ignored. They are like those witty people who ingenuously praise an ass or talk about the comfort of being in debt or the happiness of being sick with plague.

The next parts of the discourse see Sidney presenting his response to critics who criticize the rhyme and rhythm poetry. He makes it clear in the beginning itself that they are not vital parts of poetry and even without them poetry can be composed. When using verse, the poet considers the force as well as the measured quantity of each word. The poet's language becomes musical and strikes the sense easily. Second, versifying helps memory. In a verse, each word begets or leads to another word. In a well knit verse, words are so tightly packed that if one word is lost or forgotten, the whole work will be lost. Even old people remember some verses of Homer and Virgil. After that Sidney turns his attention to the four charges leveled against poetry. The first charge is that it is a waste of time to study poetry when better subjects are available. Sidney replies that it is more fruitful to study poetry than any other subject because poetry teaches us and moves us to virtues which other subjects cannot. The second charge against poetry is poets are liars. Sidney answers

that the physician who claims that a certain medicine can cure fatal diseases and the historian affirming many things are all liars. The poet can not be branded a liar because he never undertakes to tell the truth. The poet never bases a poem on a historical account. At the very outset, he invokes the muses to inspire him to be inventive. That is, he seeks divine aid to tell lies. The third charge against poetry is that it abuses man's mind by planting wanton, sinful thoughts in it. No form of poetry seems to be exempt from this. Comedies promote amorousness. Lyric and sonnets are permeated with passion. The elegist usually weeps over the death of his mistress or some near and dear. His second argument is that love of beauty is not a 'bestly fault'. Then Sidney answers the fourth charge against poetry that Even great philosophers like Plato has spoken against it and made it clear that he would banish poets from his Republic. Sidney's response is that much of the writings of plato contain only poetic elements. Though he has expressed critical remarks on poetry , he himself has made use of only poetry.

The first critical treatise of British literature has upheld the splendor of poetry. It protects poetry from the attackers by presenting powerful arguments in support of poetry. It marks the beginning of English Literary criticism for which the contribution of later critics like Dryden, Pope, Dr. Jonson, Wordsworth, Coleridge , Matthew Arnold and T.S.Eliot is remarkable.

Works Cited :

- D.J. Ernst De Chickara, Enright ed. *English Critical Texts*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press,
- V.S.Sethuraman, ed. *Contemporary Criticism An Anthology*. New Delhi: Macmillan Ltd.