

Research Article

# Ideas of Statecraft in Philip Sidney's *The Defense of Poesy*

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## Abstract

Philip Sidney was a famous courtier, soldier, poet and patron in Elizabethan England. As the best work of literary criticism in the English Renaissance, Sidney's *The Defense of Poesy* not only contains rich poetic, philosophical and aesthetic values, but also permeates with comments and suggestions on current politics, implying advanced ideas of statecraft. Studying *The Defense of Poesy* in the context of social, political and cultural anxiety in England in the late 1570s and early 1580s, this article attempts to reveal Sidney's creative motive and governing ideology. The adherence to ethical values shows his belief in "building the state with political virtue"; the praise of the heroic epic reveals the determination to "protect the state with military force"; the prospect of national poetics presents the vision of "strengthening the state with national culture". Sidney reinterpreted the function of poetry and the responsibility of poets at the time of national crisis. Discussing politics in the name of poetry, Sidney expressed his efforts to create a political poetics aiming to serve the state, and demonstrated the beautiful political vision of building a "golden world" of heroic, solidary, independent, and united England. Throughout his life, Sidney turned the ideas of statecraft into an act of serving the country. After his early death in battle, he was hailed as the cultural icon and national hero of England.

## Keywords

Philip Sidney, *The Defense of Poesy*, Ideas of Statecraft

## 1. Introduction

Philip Sidney (1554-1568) was a famous courtier, soldier, poet and patron in Elizabethan England. He was of high birth. His paternal grandfather Sir William Sidney served as a naval commander during the reign of King Henry VIII, and participated in an important combat action in the Battle of Flodden in 1513 [4]. William Sidney's military achievements made him one of Henry VIII's confidants. Philip Sidney's father Sir Henry Sidney, an intimate counsellor to King Edward VI, survived the political turbulence of the change of kingship and "retained the royal favour under successive sovereigns" [3], culminating in the position of Lord Deputy Governor of Ireland during the reign of Elizabeth. Philip Sidney's mother Mary Dudley is the daughter of the Duke of Northumberland and a court maid of Queen

Elizabeth. Philip Sidney's maternal uncle Robert Dudley, the Earl of Leicester, was the Queen's favorite and occupied an important position as Master of the Horse. His another uncle the Earl of Warwick served as Master of the Ordnance. Since both his uncles had no children when Philip Sidney was born, it was him who became their presumed heir and the hope of the whole family. The elders were eager to see him follow their footsteps, serve the state, and enhance family glory. In her biography of Philip Sidney, Katherine Duncan-Jones expounds the starting point of his life: "Much was expected of [Philip] Sidney, and he expected much." [7]

In accordance with the great expectations, Philip Sidney was educated to take on important political tasks in order to serve the

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state. He started to attend Shrewsbury School in 1564 before he enrolled for courses at Oxford University in 1568. Young as he was, Sidney had a fame of learning and eloquence. From 1572 to 1575, he undertook an educational tour to continental Europe. He visited countries such as France, Italy, Germany, Bohemia, Poland and the Netherlands, learned about the complex political situation in Europe, and got acquainted with many leading statesmen and scholars. Witnessing the the massacre of Saint Bartholomew in France as well as the uprising in low countries against Spain, Sidney firmed his own Protestant faith. Moreover, under the great influence of Earl of Leicester (his maternal uncle), Francis Walsingham (his future father-in-law), and Hubert Languet (his political mentor), all of whom were famous politicians and ardent protestants, Sidney joined the grand blueprint to establish a Protestant League in Europe in order to curb the oppressive force of Catholicism [1]. In 1575, when 21-years-old Sidney returned to England, he determined to push his country to play a central role in shaping a supranational Protestant union.

Contrary to the great attention and respect that Sidney obtained on the Continent, his circumstance in England, especially in Queen Elizabeth's court, was rather unoptimistic. Either because Sidney's strong reputation abroad made Queen Elizabeth uneasy about giving him an important position, or because the prudent Queen held an instinctive distrust of the radical younger generation, Sidney had no opportunity to exert influence on government management or policy making, let alone to realize his political ideal [15]. In about ten years, Sidney became one of the most "inactive" members of the Queen's court. The political frustration made this aspiring youth turn to a kind of "contemplative life" focusing on literary creation and literary sponsorship. Instead of being "time-killing and ink-wasting toys" [9] as Sidney called his writings, they were a projection of his unrealized ideal, full of serious thinking about social issues. In 1579, a Puritan writer Stephen Gosson wrote a pamphlet entitled *School of Abuse*, attacking poets, actors and playwrights for cheating the public and corrupting morality, and dedicated it to Sidney. In response, Sidney wrote *The Defense of Poesy* in early 1580, which not only expressed profound poetic thoughts, but also implied advanced ideas of statecraft.

## 2. Building the State with Political Virtue

Puritans' condemnation of poetry is mainly concerning morality. "The whole practice of poets [is] either with fables to shew their abuses or with playne terms to unfold their mischeefe discover their shame, discredite themselves, and disperse their poison through the world" [8]. Gosson's words suggested the morally corrupting nature of poetry. For men like him, Plato's view of expelling poets from the Republic became the main basis for their resistance to poetry. As a defender of poetry, Sidney also showed a deep concern for morality. He identified the corrupt effect as "the abuse of poetry", and affirmed that the true poetry was the art of imitation both to delight and teach. "Delight [is] to move men to that goodness in hand, which without delight they would fly as from a stranger; and teach [is] to make them know

that goodness whereunto they are moved" [14]. In view of Plato's wonderful praise of poetry in the dialogue *Ion*, Sidney reckoned that Plato was actually guarding against the abuse of poetry, not poetry itself. Therefore, this great philosopher should be the poet's protector rather than his enemy.

Sidney not only asserted the ethical value of poetry, but also defined its scope according to that value. He pointed out that poetic forms such as rhyme and rhythm were only decorations, not the essence of poetry. "It is not rhyming and versing that maketh a poet.....it is that feigning notable images of virtues, vices, or what else, with that delightful teaching, which must be the right describing note to know a poet by" [14]. It can be seen that when Sidney talked about poetry, he actually referred to literary works in general. Therefore, the prose of Xenophon and Heliodorus, the drama of Terentius and Seneca, and the fictional stories in *Aesop's Fables* were all included in the category of "poetry" by Sidney. They could be named "poetry" because they all guided people from evil to good through inspiring and unforgettable images. Then Sidney began to crown the poet. "The ending end of all earthly learning being virtuous action, those skills that most serve to bring forth that have a most just title to be princes over all the rest. Wherein, if we can, show we the poet's nobleness, by setting him before his other competitors" [14]. The poet's two main competitors, according to Sidney, were historians and philosophers.

Sidney pointed out that poetry dealt with the universal consideration, while history dealt with the particular. Confined by the imperfect fact, historians had to describe things truthfully, thus they could not give full expression of perfect models. In their fictional images, however, poets were able to reveal all the brilliant and noble qualities such as wisdom, bravery, fairness and tolerance, so that people would be moved to model their lives in accordance with this portrait of goodness. Consequently, the feigned Cyrus in Xenophon and the feigned Aeneas in Virgil were more educational than the real Cyrus and Aeneas in history. In addition, Sidney listed a series of unfair historical facts that the excellent died miserably while the tyrannical died well to demonstrate that "the history, being captived to the truth of a foolish world, is many times a terror from well-doing, and an encouragement to unbridled wickedness" [14]. Such moral ambiguity or distortion would be perfectly avoided by poets, who put shackles and handcuffs on bad people to warn others not to follow suit. In poetry we see virtue exalted and vice punished, which is what "should be" other than what "it is". The should-be is the moral dimension of poetry that historians can not always take into account.

For philosophers who also pay much attention to moral education, the poet's advantages lie in the effectiveness of education methods and the universality of education results. Through beautiful language and vivid images, poetry guides the mind to leave evil and achieve virtue. Philosophy, however, drag people to the same direction by adopting obscure concepts and severe admonitions. "Philosophers had picked out of the sweet mysteries of poetry the right discerning true points of knowledge, they forthwith putting it in method, and making a school-art of that

which the poets did only teach by a divine delightfulness” [14]. With their knowledge based on the abstract and general, the philosopher’s precept is hard to appreciate. As a result, “the philosopher teacheth, but he teacheth obscurely, so as the learned only can understand him, that is to say, he teacheth them that are already taught; but the poet is the food for the tenderest stomachs, the poet is indeed the right popular philosopher” [14]. In Sidney’s view, philosophy was like a bitter medicine that had been forced into people’s mouth. Beneficial as it was, it increased the burden of digestion. Poetry, on the other hand, was like a sugar-coated pill, which could be accepted with ease and pleasure.

It can be seen from the above that poetry is superior to history in leading people to well-knowing and to philosophy in promoting people to well-doing. “Now therein of all sciences is our poet the monarch. For he doth not only show the way, but giveth so sweet a prospect into the way, as will entice any man to enter into it” [14]. It is noteworthy that the virtue or virtuous behaviour to which Sidney pinned great importance is not only a personal quality but also closely related to state governance, as Geoffrey Shepherd said, Sidney’s poet “is the conscience and the mouth-piece of those who guide the state” [13]. Virginia Riley Hyman has also emphasized Sidney’s interest in virtuous actions of a public or political nature: “For while the Dantean concept [of virtue] is concerned with individual salvation in another life, Sidney’s is concerned with the citizen’s right action in this” [10]. To prove the magic political effect of the poetic creation, Sidney gave an example. In 493 BC, the whole people of Rome had resolutely divided themselves from the Senate. At a moment of violent conflict, the Roman consul Menenius Agrippa came to the people, “not upon trust of figurative speeches or cunning insinuations, and much less with far-fet maxims of philosophy, which they must have learned geometry before they could well have conceived; but forsooth he behaves himself like a homely and familiar poet” [14]. Agrippa told people a fable: all parts of the body thought that the belly swallowed up the fruits of their labour, so they decided to conspire against the belly and starve it. In the end, with punishing the belly, they also plagued themselves. This story produced a wonderful effect among the people: the riot ceased and a perfect reconciliation ensued. In addition to Agrippa, Simonides and Pindar are also representatives of excellent poets in Sidney’s opinion, for they “had so prevailed with Hiero the First that of a tyrant they made him a just king” [14]. The choice of these cases indicates that Sidney viewed poetry as a political, topical, and allegorical art which ideally counseled the commonwealth’s governing class as well as its members in general.

Sidney combined moral teaching of poetry with the case of governance to express his relatively progressive social ideals. By shaping the poet as a moral leader who could both admonish the monarch bluntly and instructed the public patiently, Sidney conveyed the belief of “building the state with political virtue”. He held that virtue is the ultimate goal of all human learning, knowledge should be used for the common welfare, and the goodness of ruler will bring stability to the state and happiness to the people.

### 3. Protecting the State with Military Force

In addition to eroding morality, another reason for Puritans to attack poetry is that it wore away people’s morale and transformed England from a valiant and heroic nation into a slothful and unmanly one, where “our wrestling at armes is turned to wallowing in ladies lappes; our courage to cowardice; our cunning to riot, our bowes into bolles” [8]. For Sidney, who was highly skilled in riding and martial arts, the decline of chivalry in England was indeed an important part of his attention. In a sense, Sidney shared the same deep concern with Gosson about the downfall of England’s martial temper, especially in a critical historical moment of national crisis in 1579.

As an example of the ambitious younger generation, Sidney’s radical foreign policy runs counter to Queen Elizabeth’s conservative and prudent ideas. While Sidney insisted that England should take up weapons to fight with Protestant power in low countries against Catholic Spain, and actively support Huguenots in France against the Catholic monarchy; the Queen “was perfectly willing to promote Protestantism at home but had no desire to act the leader, and paymistress, of every Protestant state in Europe” [11]. The tension between the two intensified during the Anglo-French marriage negotiations in the 1570s, and finally reached its peak in 1579. Since Elizabeth’s accession to the throne in 1558, her marriage and the subsequent succession problems had always been a major issue concerning the future of England. Although foreign royal members and domestic aristocrats continued to propose to the Queen, the absence of the “perfect spouse” had kept the Queen single for nearly 20 years. Meanwhile, her ingenious manoeuvres with various suitors also enabled England to stick to balance and independence in the midst of hostile forces abroad. However, the proposal of the French Duke of Anjou in the 1570s and the unprecedented interest and enthusiasm displayed by the Queen broke the balance, giving rise to great controversy in the court. The pro-marriage faction led by Lord Burghley, the Earl of Oxford and the Earl of Sussex believed that an alliance with France could better counter the growing threat from Spain. The anti-marriage faction represented by Francis Walsingham, the Earl of Leicester and Philip Sidney argued that the introduction of a Catholic crown prince into the Queen’s court will cause civil unrest in England. After all, the massacre of St. Bartholomew in France in 1572 was still frightening. Given the fact that the French royal family could slaughter Huguenot Protestants at the wedding of the princess, people in England had an extremely low opinion of the French Duke. Meanwhile, Queen Mary I’s bloody crackdown on the English Protestants after she married Philip II of Spain was still in public memory. The proposed marriage caused such great panic and anxiety among English people that in London preachers took to the pulpits to denounce the marriage and express their horror that Elizabeth had invited a Catholic prince to court.

The Queen wavered amid popular opposition. In August 1579, the Duke of Anjou came to England to meet Elizabeth and pro-

pose to her in person. His romantic behavior and sweet words seemed to have captured the Queen's heart. While she was expecting a splendid wedding, her people were suffering the fear of civil war and bloodshed. At that critical juncture, a Puritan John Stubbs published a pamphlet entitled *Discoverie of a Gaping Gulf whereinto England is like to be swallowed by an other French manage, if the Lord forbid not the banes, by letting her Majestie see the sin and punishment thereof*. Stubbs severely condemned France's impure motives and warned the Queen of the consequences of the match. The incitive words irritated Elizabeth, who ordered all copies of the pamphlet to be confiscated and burned, and Stubbs' right hand to be cut off as punishment for his "blasphemy against God and disrespect for the Queen" [2]. Elizabeth's anger temporarily suppressed free speech, but even more aroused public panic. Out of concern about the current political situation in England, Sidney wrote a letter to the Queen in December 1579 in order to dissuade her from marriage with the Duke of Anjou by giving a rational and practical analysis of the problems arising therefrom. In Sidney's view, Anjou was more interested in the crown than the Queen, thus marriage with that ambitious French duke would plunge England at risk of losing its independence. Elizabeth's true force lay in the support and love of her Protestant subjects, and the best way to resist the threat of Catholic Spain was to fight against it with the oppressed Netherlands. This letter, contrary to the wishes of the Queen, did not make Sidney lose his right hand, but made him lose the royal favor. He was temporarily expelled from the court and lived in seclusion at his sister's house in Wilton, during which time *The Defense of Poesy* was completed.

Against the above historical background, it is no accident that Sidney used multiple citations of war images and gave high praise of heroic poetry in his writing. He considered heroic epic as the best and most accomplished kind of poetry on account of its scope, ethical seriousness, and political ambition. Like Gosson, Sidney lamented the demise of the English chivalry tradition and acknowledged the weakness of the country's military power, but he did not put the blame on poetry. He believed that instead of softening men's will, poetry could nourish martial courage and cure idle laziness. "For Poetry is the companion of camps...as by him their learned men took almost their first light of knowledge, so their active men received their first motions of courage" [14]. Poetry, like Venus, had rather be troubled in the passionate adventure with Mars than enjoy the homely quiet of Vulcan. In fact, throughout *The Defense of Poesy*, Sidney's most consistent metaphors for the poet's role are those of warrior. From the opening allusion to horsemanship to the later choice of heroic images, Sidney transformed a scholarly debate into a military engagement. In demonstrating the potential of poetry to inspire courage, Sidney mentioned Theagenes, Orlando, Cyrus, Aeneas, Xenophon, Ulysses, and Heliodorus. These great military heroes in Greek and Roman history, Sidney believed, were all encouraged by poetry, because it was "most capable and most fit to awake the thoughts from the sleep of idleness to embrace honourable enterprises" [14]. The most honourable enterprise, for both Sidney and the ancient heroes, was to defend their prince

and country with a sword.

In defending the heroic epic, Sidney actually turned the Puritan attack on poetry to the court, suggesting a criticism of Elizabeth. The Queen's indecisive foreign policy and the courtiers' flattering echoes were undoubtedly weak and incompetent, which had restrained the development of heroism and demoralized the whole country. Throughout 1578 Sidney had sought repeatedly but to no avail for a military assignment in the Netherlands. As a result, he could only vent his passion in his writing. By combining poetry with war, Sidney portrayed the poet as a military leader waving a sword to defend his country. Several years later, this ideal of "protecting the state with military force" was realized. In 1586, facing the continuous civil strife in France, the failure of Anglo-French marriage negotiations, the near collapse of the Netherlands uprising, and the imminent threat of Spain, the Queen finally allowed Sidney to join the English Expeditionary Force to the Netherlands under the leadership of the Earl of Leicester. As a cavalry general, Sidney charged bravely and died on the battlefield, writing a solemn heroic poem with his own actions.

#### 4. Strengthening the State with National Culture

In 1586, Sidney ended his life heroically. However, in the previous decade, Queen Elizabeth refused to entrust him with any important task, and Sidney turned his energy to literary creation. At that time, the literary scene in England was rather bleak compared to the blooming Renaissance in European continental countries. English elites, among whom Sidney was a central figure, felt dwarfed when facing the brilliant achievements of the Italian and French people in the native cultures. Although Queen Elizabeth wrote poems, she "was not personally a very generous patron of the new trends in literature, art, and scholarship" [12]. The courtiers and nobles wrote poetry for the political purpose of winning the favor of the queen to consolidate their status in the court; the low-born aspiring youths wrote poetry to seek aristocratic patronage for personal promotion; the professional writers with short ambitions and poor talents wrote poetry for publication and sales to gain financial interests. The utilitarianism of creative motivation and the mediocrity of aesthetic taste had made poetry not be esteemed in England. Shepherd pointed out that *The Defense of Poesy* was "being written at a time of crisis in England's national identity, when England stands on the verge of losing its independence either to foreign powers or to foreign cultural values." [13]

In the last part of *The Defense of Poesy*, Sidney focused on the current situation of English literature and criticized its shortcomings. Tragedy did not abide by proper etiquette and rules; comedy only brought about laughter, not delight; and poetry became "a confused mass of words, with a tingling sound of rhyme, barely accompanied with reason" [14]. Pretentious, stereotyped and artificial, those works were by no means sincere and touching. However, Sidney believed that it was the fault of



“poet-apes” who followed the ancient or foreign examples blindly, not “true poets” who should implant native culture and national feeling into the established forms. In response to the problems of “poet-apes”, Sidney said “they that delight in poesy itself should seek to know what they do, and how they do; and especially look themselves in an unflattering glass of reason, if they be inclinable unto it” [14]. Then he suggested to the “true poets” that “as the fertilest ground must be manured, so must be the highest-flying wit have a Daedalus to guide him” [14]. Daedalus was a craftsman in the Greek legend, who flew over the Aegean Sea with self-made wings. In Sidney’s opinion, the three wings that could bring a poet into the sky of honor were art, imitation and exercise. These three items could give the best play to the poet’s intelligence, thus help him create immortal poems.

In spite of the awareness of the bleak current situation of English literature, however, Sidney still cherished ambition and confidence in establishing national poetics. The remaining few pages of *The Defense of Poesy* deal chiefly with technical matters such as diction, alliteration, similes, grammar, quantitative and accented rhymed verse. In discussing these Sidney adopted a truly patriotic attitude. He praised the English language passionately: “our language giveth us great occasion, being indeed capable of any excellent exercising of it” [14]. English was not only able to express ideas gracefully and accurately like any other languages, but also had a great advantage in vocabulary: “it is particularly happy in compositions of two or three words together, near the Greek, far beyond the Latin, which is one of the greatest beauties can be in a language” [14]. Noting the deficiencies of syllables and rhythms in Italian, Dutch, French and Spanish, Sidney proudly declared that the English was subject to none of those defects and that “our tongue is most fit to honour poesy, and to be honoured by poesy” [14]. After investigating the previous English literature and affirming the remarkable achievements of Chaucer and the Earl of Surrey, Sidney urged the current English poets to create in their own national language a kind of native literature comparable with the ancient Greek and Roman literature.

In his writing, Sidney conveyed the idea of “strengthening the state with national culture”. Building England into a country friendly to the Muse could help it accumulate cultural and diplomatic capital on the international stage. In reality, Sidney also tried to put this idea into action. He created a romantic legend *Arcadia* in 1580, which pioneered the English prose novel. The revised version of *New Arcadia* in 1584 gave a glance of epic grandeur. *Astrophil and Stella*, a collection of sonnets and songs Sidney wrote in 1581-82, was the first successful and the most influential sonnet sequence in England, which won him the reputation of “English Petrarche” [16]. Sidney not only devoted himself to literary creation, but also set up a poetry society with like-minded friends Fulke Greville and Edward Dale to conduct quantitative experiments based on classical poetry. At the same time, Sidney actively sponsored talented poets, including Edmund Spenser and Gabriel Harvey. With the continuous expansion of Sidney’s literary reputation and influence, a literary group, among whom were Samuel Daniel and Michael Drayton, grad-

ually gathered around him, which was later known as “Sidney Circle” [6]. As one of the greatest patron in Elizabethan era, Sidney’s “lively intelligence and sure taste stimulated and guided the poets of the English Renaissance” [5].

After Sidney’s death, his family carried forward his literary ideal. His younger sister Mary, the Countess of Pembroke, continued to carry out literary patronage. Her manor in Wilton became a gathering place for men of letters who enjoyed her hospitality and wrote poetry, talked poetry, argued poetry together. “The Elizabethan poets never doubted that but for Philip and Mary Sidney their work would have been negligible” [5]. In addition, Mary completed the translation of David’s Psalms in the *Bible*, sorted out the manuscripts of Sidney’s works and published them. Sidney’s younger brother Robert, the second Earl of Leicester, inherited Sidney’s spiritual legacy, able to wield both the pen and the gun. Inspired by their elders, the descendants of the Sidney family were also active in the English literary world. Mary’s son, William Herbert, the second Earl of Pembroke, not only wrote poems himself, but also was a patron of William Shakespeare. Robert’s daughter Mary Wroth imitated and echoed his uncle Sidney’s literary works from the female perspective, becoming the first female writer to create romantic legend and sonnet sequence in the history of English literature, and one of the earliest female writers to create dramas.

It can be said that Sidney set off a literary revolution in England. His personal literary achievements as well as the sponsorship system he created triggered a creative upsurge in the 1590s, opening the prelude to the golden age of English literature. Sidney’s efforts to revitalize English national poetics led to the remarkable rise of literature in the later decades of Elizabeth’s reign. In a short period of twenty or thirty years, numerous masterpieces sprang up in the literary arena. The English native literature completed a leapfrog development from decline to prosperity, and Sidney’s vision of “strengthening the state with national culture” was finally realized.

## 5. Conclusion

Philip Sidney wrote *The Defense of Poesy* in the period of his political frustration. Deprived of the opportunity to serve the state directly, he turned to writing as an alternative which could influence society indirectly. Thus *The Defense of Poesy* not only contains rich poetic, philosophical and aesthetic values, but also permeates with comments and suggestions on current politics, implying advanced ideas of statecraft. By establishing the poet’s position as a moral leader, military leader and cultural leader of the country, Sidney conveyed his ideal of “building the state with political virtue”, “protecting the state with military force” and “strengthening the state with national culture”. Sidney reinterpreted the function of poetry and the responsibility of poets at the time of national crisis. Discussing politics in the name of poetry, Sidney expressed his efforts to create a political poetics aiming to serve the state, and demonstrated the beautiful political vision of building a “golden world” of heroic, solidary, independent, and united England. Throughout his life, Sidney turned the ideas of

statecraft into the acts of serving the country. After his early death in battle, he was known as the cultural icon and national hero of England.

## Conflicts of Interest

All the authors do not have any possible conflicts of interest.

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