

HUMOUR IN SIR PHILIP SIDNEY'S *THE DEFENSE OF POESY*:
"THE RIGHT" POET AS CRITIC*

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Persons attempting to find humour in the *Apology* will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find humorous remarks in it will be banished; persons attempting to find mockery, ridicule, or any satiric intent in it will be shot.

By Order of the Author
(Sir Philip Sidney, Acting
on Mark Twain's Advice)

Sidney's *The Defense of Poesy*, also known as *An Apology for Poetry*, was written about 1583, but published posthumously in 1595. That this masterpiece is an important contribution to English critical theory and literary criticism at large is conspicuously demonstrated in the voluminous commentary it has received since its publication. Indeed, there are major discussions of Sidney's *Defense*, some of which undoubtedly have promoted readers' understanding of the work, and some others have opened up new avenues of further investigations. What has not been recognized fully and expounded, however, is Sidney's use of humour in the *Defense* as a basic method to achieve multiple purposes. The failure to recognize humour in Sidney's *Defense* has been caused by the purported high seriousness of purpose claimed for the work. Consequently, a considerable number of scholars have focussed on and overemphasized the Platonic or Neo-Platonic, Aristotelian, religious, or even Calvinist traditions, ignoring thereby the humorous and playful, which is, to be sure,

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concomitant with the serious in the essay.¹ Sidney may have been a serious poet, fiction writer, and critic, but he sometimes deliberately shows a propensity for humorous lightness, but without being frivolous or farcical.

The primary objective of this study, therefore, is first to identify Sidney's conception of humour within the Renaissance milieu, and then to discern humorous touches throughout the *Defense*, pointing out their function and overall impact on Sidney's purpose and thought.

The essence of Sidney's conception of humour in general is explained, in a letter to Hubert Languet in which, according to Robert Nicholas Reeves, he alludes to 'the rejuvenating power of humor' when he states: "And this refreshing of the mind consists, more than any thing else, in that seemly play of humor which is so natural, and so ingrafted, so to speak, in the characters of the wisest of men, that neither Socrates nor our own More could lose their jest even in the hour of death. So let us even be merry."² Sidney is well aware of paradoxes and contrarities in the life and thought of human beings. Humour conceived as 'refreshing of the mind' would possibly safeguard against a tragic *Weltschauen*, and against human folly and vanity as well. Such a healthy outlook on life does not detract from the seriousness of Sidney's purpose. As Reeves (1974:1) observes, "The comments, if applied to Sidney's writing, imply that humor would come naturally to even the most serious composition." Reeves makes this remark with Sidney's *New Arcadia* chiefly in mind. Yet it is quite relevant to Sidney's 'serious composition' of the *Defense*. This point is to be remembered in view of the general tendency of some critics and readers to think (perhaps wrongly) that when a literary critic is at work, then all that is said and thought is necessarily high seriousness.³

¹ Of the scholars who overemphasized the Platonic or Neoplatonic elements, for instance, see Samuel (1940: 383-391); Krouse (Spring, 1954: 138-141); and McIntyre (1962: 363). Of those who overemphasized Sidney's Aristotelianism, see Spingarn (1908: 268). Myrick (1935; rpt. 1965) discusses the *Defense* within the framework of a classical oration. Coogan (1981: 255-70) takes issue with Myrick and argues that the latter's outline of the *Defense* as classical oration has led to misunderstanding of Sidney's essay. Hardison (1972: 83-99), too, objects to Myrick's idea only to suggest that the essay combines basic humanist poetics with neoclassical literary theory. Of scholars who indulged in the 'religious' seriousness of the *Defense*, see Wallace (1915: 239) who detects a 'religious' tone in Sidney's attitude to poetry in the *Apology*. Dorsten (1966; rpt. 1971: 82-83) in the "Notes" attached to his edition finds 'a personal religious overtone' in Sidney's description of poetry. Weiner (1978: 28-50) goes as far as basing Sidney's *Defense* largely on Calvinist theology. In a more balanced study, Craig (1980: 183-201) justifiably objects to the extreme opinions of Wallace, Dorsten, and Weiner only to present a 'hybrid growth' of Aristotelian and Platonic doctrines, and thus, he, too, ignores Sidney's use of humour.

² Quoted in Reeves (1974: 1). For a thorough study of Humour in Sidney's *Old Arcadia*, see Lanham (1965).

³ Connell (1977: 143) acutely states that "Sidney's habit of mind is to join contra-

Sidney's conception of humour is by no means unique or astounding. Men of his age, to be sure, shared similar views. Cazamian (1951: 119) asserts that "examples of the most accomplished method of humor were offered ... by two eminent writers," namely, Erasmus and More. Cazamian states further that,

The inspiration of humanism runs through the work of English writers who were definitely spurred to expression by their enthusiastic love of classical models. The brand of humor associated with the scholars, from Udall, the schoolmaster, and the 'University Wits' to Sir Philip Sidney, the nobleman and the knight, on the whole shows the predominance of a somewhat similar vein, here again the tone of pleasantry is colored by the knowledge of pre-existing patterns. (ibid. 120).

Elaborating on the same observation, Cazamian adds, "In humor as in other fields, it [the Renaissance] took the initiative; and the rebirth of Chaucer's *finesse* under the stimulus of the humanists from More to Lyly might have proved in that respect of overwhelming importance, finally shaping the growth of literary pleasantry" (ibid., p. 121). It is such a 'tone of pleasantry' that marks many passages of Sidney's *Defense* as will be demonstrated. Yet this is only one brand of humour that is properly so called 'a lambent humour,' which, 'enlivens the serious, didactic eloquence of the *Apology for Poetry*, as well as the romantic fancy of the *Arcadia*.' (ibid. p. 139).⁴ In addition, the very comic remarks made directly by Sidney and indirectly through his adaptations or quotations from such writers as Horace, Persius, Juvenal (as satirists) and his frequent references to anecdotes and fables such as those of Aesop and his 'pretty allegories' which are dominated by purposeful humour, not to mention the allusions to Chaucer, More, and Erasmus, his discussion of the 'satiric' that eventually leads to 'avoiding folly,' — all attest to Sidney's knowledge of and interest in another brand of humour which may be truly called 'satiric humour,' that which intends to disparage and ridicule a certain target but aims to correct, cure, or improve. Sidney does not adhere to any particular formula of humour. In fact, he is capable of using both kinds of humour effectively in the *Defense*; that is, a lambent humour, accompanied by what is pleasing and graceful, and a satiric humour fused with the ironic and ridiculous. Although the two kinds are often mutually exclusive, it is dictory tendencies of thought and feeling, always keeping hold on the facts of earthly experience." Thus, she adds, "we find in Sidney the consciousness of human folly coexisting with the belief in the wisdom of that folly, the serious love of truth coexisting with the sophistication of courtly and humanistic games, ... and ... the certitude of tragedy and evil in the world coexisting with a triumphant comic and heroic affirmation.

⁴ Cazamian is one of the few commentators who do recognize humour, though briefly and incidentally, in both Sidney's *Apology* and the *Arcadia*, but no examples are provided. There are other scholars who also recognize humour in Sidney's work, though again, only in occasional references. See Kinney (1972: 1-19)I; Levao (March 1979: 223-33); and Dencef (1980: 155-191).

surely the satiric humour that is attended by 'playful aggression' which Feinberg (1979: 205) deems 'the secret of humor'. Feinberg makes the point that aggression is humorous only when it is playful. He says "The superiority theories from Aristotle through Hobbes to Rapp, insist that pleasure at someone else's expense is an indispensable element in the humorous process' (ibid. 201). Any defense is unlikely to be devoid of aggression against the antagonist, yet when Sidney resorts to this weapon, he handles it playfully and carefully. In a word, aggression in the *Defense* is generally a 'literary pleasantry' that is *not* malicious or bitter, but playful and corrective at the same time.

Before turning to the text of the *Defense* itself, it is significant to recall that "it [the *Defense*] was originally addressed to a court in which the Queen played the role of chief judge" (Ferguson 1979: 62). A prior knowledge or anticipation of the kind of audience and/or readers addressed would surely help the speaker or writer to set the appropriate tone and to choose the effective mode of expression in order to achieve his ultimate end. Of Sidney's opponents, Stephen Gosson would be the first, together with all those who are prone to misread or misunderstand the art of poetry in particular, and 'all imaginative writing' in general. Sidney's assumed audience, moreover, would include critics, readers of poetry and young promising poets; and it is this category whom he strives to delight *and* teach.⁵

Sidney begins his *Defense* with an anecdote about John Pugliano who so overpraised horsemanship that he almost convinced Sidney to become a horse. This delightful note of pleasantry wins the attention of Sidney's audience and establishes the theme of praise in the *Defense*. Then, too, from the very beginning the audience becomes aware of the speaker's self-conscious ironic implication that his praise of 'poor' poetry is not going to be so lavish and excessive as Pugliano's encomium of horsemanship. The humorous anecdote, moreover, gives the impression that the speaker is not indignant or infuriated but rather relaxed and confident of himself, despite the harsh and malicious attacks launched unduly against poets and poetry as in Stephen Gosson's *School of Abuse* (1579). The pleasant impression is reinforced when Sidney rather nonchalantly, as if he regrets being a poet, wonders 'by what mischance' he had 'slipped into the title of a poet' and inevitably to be compelled 'to say something in the defense of my unelected vocation.'⁶

The analogy established by reference to the anecdote between Pugliano's

⁵ Regarding the question of audience and who is addressed in Sidney's *Defense* and the motives behind it, critical opinion is divided. See Weiner (1978: 26) and Deneef (1980: 188). The phrase used above, 'all imaginative writing' is borrowed from Lewis (1954: 318) where he states that "the word 'poetry' often covered all imaginative writing whether in prose or verse."

⁶ This paper will use the text found in Soens (1970). All further references to the *Defense* will be made in the body of the paper, referring to the page then line number.

extravagant praise of horsemanship and Sidney's fair praise of poetry is carried on. Lamenting the low status of poetry, Sidney purports to make 'a pitiful defense of poor poetry' as he has more 'just cause' than Pugliano (4: 1-2). Since poetry was highly esteemed in the past but now undervalued and held in contempt, it appears to be in an undeservedly 'poor' and helpless position, hence Sidney's deep sympathy. As such, the words 'pitiful' and 'poor' are conceivably used with comic irony. "The silly latter [poetry]," he quips, with a comic compassionate air, "has had even the names of philosophers used to the defacing of it, with great danger of civil war among the muses" (4: 6-7). Sidney then presents one of the main arguments in favour of poetry: that it is 'the first light-giver to ignorance' (4: 11-12). The gist of the argument is illustrated by referring to the fable of the snake and the hedgehog. To indicate the 'ungratefulness' of those who 'deface' poetry, Sidney raises two rhetorical questions. "And will they now play the hedgehog that being received into the den, drove out his host? Or rather the vipers that with their birth kill their parents?" (4: 13-15).⁷ Here Sidney ridicules poet-haters by equating them with the ungrateful hedgehog and the vipers as they appear in the context of fables, known to his audience. This droll humour coupled with what Feinberg calls 'playful aggression' helps Sidney to advance his argument and to destroy the moral conduct and reasoning of his antagonists.

Speaking of the different disciplines of liberal studies, Sidney argues that poets are superior to historians, saying "And even historiographers (although their lips sound of things done and verity be written in their foreheads) have been glad to borrow both fashion and perchance weight of the Poets" (6: 16-18). Antithesis and irony are at the core of this statement. Historiographers are thus depicted as inferior to poets, being merely borrowers of 'fashion' and 'weight' from poets. They speak ('lips') of the past and the 'verity' of their findings appear 'in their foreheads' as a sign or advertisement of their claimed honesty. The ironic use of the common idiom 'verity be written in their foreheads'⁸ underlies the praise given to poets at the expense of historiographers who are being mocked.

⁷ As quoted in Collins (1907: 64) the fable referred to is as follows: "A snake was prevailed upon in a cold winter to take a hedgehog into his cell: but, when he was once in, the place was so narrow that the prickles of the hedgehog were very troublesome to his companion, so that the snake told him he must needs provide for himself somewhere else, for the hole was not big enough to hold them both. Why then, says the hedgehog, he that cannot stay shall do well to go, but for my own part I am e'en contented as I am and, if you bee not so too, you are free to remove." The other fable about vipers, which embodies a similar moral, was a humanist commonplace too.

⁸ According to Shepherd (1965: 149) the common idiom 'verity be written in their foreheads' implies 'an advertisement of frankness and honesty' and it is used 'ironically' by Sidney.

Even so, Sidney is not through with the historiographers yet, as he finds later in the essay more room for more mockery. Accordingly, a very ludicrous picture of the historian is presented:

The historian scarcely gives leisure to the moralist to say so much but that he, *loaded with old mouse-eaten records*, authorizing himself, for the most part, upon other histories (whose greatest authorities are built upon the notable foundation, *hearsay*), having much ado to accord differing writers and to pick truth out of partiality, better acquainted with a thousand years ago than with the present age *and yet* better knowing how this world goes than how his own wit runs, curious for antiquities and inquisitive of novelties, *a wonder to young folks* and *a tyrant in table-talk*, denies in a great chafe that any man for teaching of virtue and virtuous actions is comparable to him. (italics mine). (15: 8—18).

One cannot help thinking of Theophrastian characters when this humorous portrait is contemplated. Sidney's concrete pictorial image of the historian 'loaded with old mouse-eaten records' is both funny and informative. The ensuing telling images and deft descriptive details illustrate the pretensions of the historian and his deviations from all that is creative and truthful. No wonder he is assaulted by Sidney and rendered inferior even to the moral philosopher, and, of course, to the poet. The historian receives further attack in another passage in the essay where Sidney discards not only the examples presented by the historian as improbable, if not invalid, but also the historical approach, the chopped and misleading logic he uses, the result of which is sheer absurdity, as the following passage demonstrates:

And whereas a man say, though in universal consideration of doctrine the poet prevails, yet that the history in his saying such a thing *was* done, does warrant a man more in that he shall follow, the answer is manifest that, if he stand upon that *was* (as if he should argue because it rained yesterday, therefore it should rain today), then indeed has it some advantage to a gross conceit. But if he know an example only informs a conjectured likelihood, and so go by reason, the poet does so far exceed him [the historian] as he [his reader] is to frame his example to that which is most reasonable, be it in warlike, politic, or private matters, where the historian in his bare *was* has many times that which we call fortune to over-rule the best wisdom. Many times he must tell events whereof he can yield no cause, or if he do, it must be poetically. (Sidney's italics) (20: 12—25).

Sidney ridicules the historian and diminishes the usefulness of his method of reasoning primarily to show by contrast the supremacy of the poet, his 'true' example, and his valid conclusions which are grounded in delightful instruction.

Poetry, Sidney then argues, has always been highly esteemed by all nations (including Saxons, Danes, Normans, Indians, Turks), particularly the Romans, who bestowed upon the poet the honorable name of a prophet or seer, and the Greeks, who called the poet a maker. When Sidney refers to the Greeks, he adds the insinuating remark, "wherein (I know not whether by luck or wisdom) we Englishmen have met with the Greeks in calling him

a maker" (8: 26—27). The parenthetical remark appertaining to 'we Englishmen' and Sidney's 'feigned' suspension of judgment embodies an indirect censure of Sidney's countrymen who are, Sidney implies, more civilized and more learned, and therefore should not scorn poetry and poets, "since" he insists, "It [poetry] is so universal that no learned nation does despise it nor barbarous nation is without it" (31: 24—25). Or when he reiterates later "... even Turks and Tartars are delighted with poets" (38: 26—27). Englishmen, therefore, should be ashamed of themselves for despising poets.

When the definition, divisions and subdivisions of Poetry are provided, Sidney argues that 'right' poets 'teach and delight', and more importantly, they "teach to make them [men] know that goodness whereunto they are moved (which, being the noblest scope to which ever any learning was directed, yet want there not idle tongues to bark at them)" (12: 22—25). The antithesis is drawn with the poet-haters in mind. The satiric hit implied in the parenthetical statement equates poet-haters with barking dogs, suggesting that Sidney's opponents produce annoying sounds but surely no sense.

Sidney then makes a vital distinction between creative poetry and verse, the former being the guide and inspiration to the supreme end of earthly learning, that is virtuous action, whereas verse is merely the poet's 'fittest raiment' (13: 11). When he defines poetry by negation, i.e., by what it is not, Sidney says that "it is not rhyming and versing that makes a poet", he hastens to add parenthetically "(no more than a long gown makes an advocate who, though he pleaded in armor, should be an advocate and no soldier)" (13: 5—7). The parenthetical proverbial remark quoted helps to explain the distinction Sidney is making between poetry and verse, but the explanation is humorously rendered at the expense of the legal profession of which he seems to be critical. The satiric humour levelled against the legal profession is observed also when Sidney argues that poetry is the noblest of all secular learning. The poet (of all such professionals as the historian, the moral philosopher and the lawyer) enjoys 'the supreme knowledge' and accordingly deserves 'the best commendation' (16: 20—22). In this context and with relevance to 'the lawyer' Sidney says:

And for the lawyer, though *Jus* be the daughter of Justice, the chief of virtues, yet because he seeks to make men good rather through fear of punishment than through love of virtue, or, to say righter, does not endeavor to make men good, but that their evil hurt not others, having no care, so he be a good citizen, how bad a man he be, therefore (as our wickedness makes him necessary and necessity makes him honorable) so is he not in the deepest truth to stand in rank with these who all endeavor to take naughtiness away and plant goodness even in the secretest cabinet of our souls. (16: 10—19).

The entire text is worth quoting in full because it shows how much time and space Sidney cared to allocate for expressing, in a humorous vein, his attitude

toward the lawyer. With admirable economy, Sidney belittles the lawyer who 'does not endeavor to make men good.' The lawyer is made 'honorable' only by 'necessity,' i.e., ironically by 'our wickedness' and not by his 'love of virtue'. Such expressions as 'he does not endeavor' and 'having no care' indicate his lack of will to be what he is not. It is indifference, if not negligence on his part, hence Sidney's humorous portrait of the lawyer and the playful aggression against his profession.

Even astronomers do not escape Sidney's humorous touches while discussing the 'ending end' of poetry, namely, 'virtuous action.' In this regard, Sidney's argument is reinforced by comparing poetry with other disciplines, arts or sciences. For Sidney, 'well-knowing' must lead to 'well-doing,' and of all the competitors, it is poetry that enjoys the first and achieves the second. Therefore, it is the poet who deserves the 'just title of prince.' Having established this point concerning the positive interrelationship between knowing and doing, Sidney proceeds to mock at the poet's various competitors. The astronomers, to begin with, are disparaged, and their science is reduced to folly and nonsense. "For some," Sidney remarks teasingly "that thought this felicity principally to be gotten by knowledge and no knowledge to be so high or heavenly as acquaintance with the stars, gave themselves to astronomy" (13: 26-29). The astronomer's peculiar way of thinking is mocked because of his foolish and absurd notion of knowledge. Satiric humour is sharpened by the antithesis between 'high' knowledge and the stars. The portrait of the astronomer is made even more ridiculous in the following passage, where other inferior competitors are brought into the picture:

But when by the balance of experience it was found that the astronomer looking to the stars might fall in a ditch, that the inquiring philosopher might be blind in himself and the mathematician might draw forth a straight line with a crooked heart, then, lo! did proof, the overruler of opinions, make manifest that all these are but serving sciences which, as they have each a private end in themselves, so yet are they all directed to the highest end of the mistress-knowledge (italics mine)* (14: 4-11).

The basic antithesis here is evidently between 'the mistress-knowledge' and the other disciplines of the liberal arts. Sidney's pragmatic argument is that knowledge must lead to virtuous action. This didactic principle is enlivened by humorous touches associated with the other competitors and their 'serving sciences.' The problem, rather, the fault with any possible knowledge attained by the astronomer and the mathematician is dissociated from the practice of virtue. This thought of Sidney is expressed through exquisite concrete images which suggest that the astronomer and the mathematician lack

* Shepherd (1965:167) notes that Sidney, with the image of 'the astronomer looking to the stars' in mind used a simile to the same effect in *Astrophel and Stella*, XIX.

true and straightforward vision. The astronomer 'looks', he can see, but not the danger ahead, 'the ditch' he is about to fall in. The mathematician, too, receives his share of ridicule. The value of his science is questioned. His *straight* line is after all drawn by a *crooked* heart. Undoubtedly, Sidney displays in a humorous manner his moral scruples regarding the nature and function of all these disciplines to show in the main the superiority of the art he is 'provoked' to defend. In a later section of the *Defense* Sidney seizes another opportunity to resume his attack against the astronomer, this time, in conjunction with the geometrician. Refuting the charge that poetry is "the mother of lies" Sidney points out that "the poet is the least liar and, though he would, as a poet can scarcely be a liar". Conversely, he hastens to add playfully, "The astronomer, with his cousin the geometrician can hardly escape [lying] when they take upon them to measure the height of the stars" (35: 12-15).

Sidney's use of humour, however, is not confined to contexts such as these. His penchant for humour, to be sure, is observed in his discussion of the 'satiric' and the 'comic' as subdivisions of creative poetry. For him, (abuses aside), the 'right use' of these two kinds makes vice abominable and virtue desirable. There is also Sidney's lengthy discussion of the 'delightful' and the 'ridiculous' in literary composition. It is not surprising, then, to find examples in the text of the *Defense* which are cited or adapted from the works of such 'smiling railers' (to borrow Sidney's term) as Horace, Persius, and (the less smiling) Juvenal.¹⁰ In fact, Sidney himself rails smilingly against poet-haters, biased critics and readers, whom he describes as "pleasant fault-finders, who will correct the verb before they understand the noun and confute others' knowledge before they confirm their own" and deservedly they have earned "the best title in true English," which is "good fools" (33: 7-11). Sometimes, even before answering a given charge against poetry Sidney, with a certain tale in mind, makes a humorous remark to ridicule those who initiated that charge. "And lastly and chiefly" he says, "they cry out with open mouth (as if they had overshot Robin Hood)¹¹ that Plato banished them [poets] out of his commonwealth" (34: 30-32). The humorous description of his opponents' manner of expressing this charge so vociferously (as if they had shot with Robin Hood's bow) serves Sidney's immediate purpose. Detailed answers to such charges will soon follow, but Sidney tells his audience at this point that the charges are extravagant and those who level them are presumptuous and ridiculous.

¹⁰ Of other 'smiling railers' and their poetically devised tales and fables Sidney shows particular interest in Agrippa, Aesop, and Erasmus, e.g., on pp. 25, 32, 33, 35 in Soens' edition of the *Defense*.

¹¹ Collins (1965: 90) explains that this is obviously a reference to the proverb, "Many a man speaketh of Robin Hood that never shot in his bow," which is applied to those who profess to know all about matters of which they are ignorant.

Because some modern readers of the *Defense* might assume that Sidney was merely interested in Horace's (serious) *Ars Poetica*, it is good to point out that Horace's as well as Juvenal's satires had their impact on Sidney's method of humour in the essay. For instance, within the process of refutation of the charges against poetry, Sidney discusses 'the ordinary doctrine of ignorance' (38: 14) whose followers claim that all learning is a waste of time, (Shepherd 1965: 204) to which he replies that "all government of action is to be gotten by knowledge, and knowledge best by gathering many knowledges, which is reading" including, of course, reading poetry. Any person who believes otherwise, i.e., that reading poetry is a waste of time "I only, with Horace, 'cheerfully bid him to remain foolish'" (38: 18-22) (*ibid.*: 205). The adaptation from Horace's *Satires* (I, i, 53) reinforces Sidney's argument in a humorous way.

In a passage in the *Defense*, to cite another example, this time from Juvenal's satires, Sidney makes a fine distinction between true or 'right' poets and 'bastard' poets, as follows:

For now, as if all the Muses were got with child to bring forth bastard poets, without any commission they do post over the banks of Helicon till they make the readers more weary than post-horses, while in the meantime they 'whose hearts the Titan moulded out of better clay'¹² are better content to suppress the out-flowings of their wit than, by publishing them, to be accounted knights of the same order. (45: 3-9)

Humour embodied in the hyperbolic hypothesis, "as if *all* the Muses were got with child ..." is intended to ridicule any sweeping and unfair generalization about poets. Poet-haters are to realize that it is only bad poets who 'disgrace the most graceful poesy' (45: 2-3). The adaptation from Juvenal's (*Satires*, XIV, 11. 33-35) supports Sidney's viewpoint and implies that Sidney's adversaries lose sight of the fact that there are poets 'of better clay' who are *not* 'bastard poets'.

Sidney's resourcefulness is manifest in numerous allusions to Greek, Roman, English, and European authors and their works. As used in various contexts of the *Defense*, such references help to elucidate and support or to refute and invalidate a certain assumption or conclusion made by poet-haters.

It is this richly allusive method of humour which he uses in vindicating the art of poetry and justifying its moral end that impresses the audience and readers at large, evokes their admiration, and promotes their understanding of his critical viewpoints. In any case, Sidney's 'literary pleasantry' and the

¹² For Sidney's allusion to Juvenal's *Satires*, XIV, 33-35, see Shepherd p. 215. For another example, see p. 5 in the text used where Sidney refers to Juvenal's *Satires*, III, 152-3 in his discussion of the 'ridiculous' and the 'delightful' within the framework of the 'comical.'

refreshing force of his humour enliven his complex arguments and serious pronouncements as the foregoing examples have thus far revealed.

Some of Sidney's humorous touches are less subtle and less lambent than others even though they produce the desired effect. One of the notorious charges, it is recalled, is that Plato banished poets from his republic. In answering this charge, Sidney maintains that Plato meant to condemn only the abuse of poetry, not 'the thing' itself. Then he turns his corrective lash of ridicule against those who launched the charge when he says, "For indeed I had much rather (since truly I may do it) show their mistaking of Plato, under whose lion's skin they would make an ass-like braying against poesy, than go about to overthrow his authority ..." (42: 6-9). The phrase 'under whose lion's skin' refers to Aesop's fable of the ass in the lion's skin which has the moral "that each should content himself with his own praiseworthy achievements and not seek to appropriate the merits or characteristics of another" (Shepherd 1965: 209-210). The humorous reference to the fable is self-explanatory. The antithesis is between the lion (Plato with his great merits) and the ass (the poet-haters 'braying' against poetry to no avail). Interestingly, humour in this instance sounds Juvenalian, for being so sharp and severe. Animal imagery of the sort is employed in connection with other humorous statements made elsewhere in the *Defense*, when for instance, Sidney says, 'for poesy must not be drawn by the ears' (45: 20-21), most likely the ears of an ass.¹³

Sidney also finds some faults with English drama as well. To show that certain English tragedies and comedies are 'very defectious in the circumstances' (47: 7-8) because of the dramatists' disregard of the unities of place and time, Sidney mocks at such a dramatic practice:

Now you shall have three ladies walk to gather flowers and then *we must believe* the stage to be a garden. By and by we hear news of shipwreck in the same place. Then *we are to blame* if we accept it not for a rock. Upon the back of that comes out a hideous monster with fire and smoke, and then the miserable beholders *are bound to take it* for a cave, while in the meantime two armies fly in, represented with four swords and bucklers, and then what hard heart will not receive it for a pitched field? (*italics mine*) (47: 19-25).

Humour is used here to illustrate the author's notion of the dramatic unities, especially the unity of place. Observance of the unities was a commonplace in the 16th and 17th centuries. Sidney argues in a humorous way which makes violation of the unity of place appear ridiculous. Accordingly, the 'miserable beholders,' on whom such improbable circumstances are imposed, are to believe the absurd and incredible. Humour has been thus used to indicate some 'gross

¹³ Relevant to this animal imagery is Sidney's humorous reference to the ass's ears of Midas at the very end of the essay.

absurdities' (49: 4) of English dramatic practice, and Sidney is calling for a reform of the existing practices of his time.

In a similar vein of mockery, Sidney seizes the opportunity to point out other 'gross absurdities,' faults and deficiencies common to English poetry and English prose as well. He objects chiefly to affectation in diction. Then in an excursus upon euphuism, he ridicules poets and prose writers who use the decorated style aiming at impressing their readers with their eloquence and mellifluous diction. Such writers are mocked because of their 'honey-flowing matron Eloquence' which is at one time 'appareled, or rather disguised, in a courtesan-like painted affectation,' and at another time 'with figures and flowers extremely winter-starved' (51: 25—31).¹⁴

Sidney regrets the fact that this stylistic fault is committed not only by the 'diligent imitators of Tully and Demosthenes' (52: 5—6) but also by 'prose printers,' 'many scholars,' and 'some preachers.'¹⁵ It is the overemphasis on figures, phrases, and words as ornaments that led Sidney to castigate such stylists. "For now," he says, "they cast sugar and spice upon every dish that is served to the table." And to show their bad and indiscriminate taste, he adds parenthetically the humorous analogy: "(like those Indians, not content to wear earrings at the fit and natural place of the ears, but they will thrust jewels through their nose and lips because they will be sure to be fine)" (52: 9—13). These humorous remarks illustrate the gross stylistic absurdities and mistaken practices of certain writers and orators. Casting *both* sugar and spice on the same dish and *thrusting* jewels in the wrong places suggest extravagance, inappropriateness, and distortion. The humorous analogy is intended to throw light on similar deficiencies relating to an excessive ornamentation of style. As if this denunciation is not enough to evoke the audience's laughter, Sidney resumes his jocular attack against those who are engaged in such faulty practices, as he now tells of a joke used in medieval logic courses to illustrate distinctions between name and thing. "Truly," he remarks, "they have made me think of the sophister that with too much subtlety would prove two eggs three and, though he might be counted a soph-

¹⁴ For a good detailed study of Sidney's rejection of Ciceronian rhetoric as it was practised by the Ciceronians in the Renaissance in favour of a 'plain style' see Montgomery (1962). As for Sidney's own style, Montgomery argues that it was a mixed one, 'sometimes predominantly ornate, sometimes mostly plain, but seldom absolutely one or another' (p. 6). This might be true, but I think that whenever Sidney uses the 'ornate style,' especially in *Astrophel and Stella*, he seeks, sometimes through parody, to produce a humorous effect; but more space and time are needed for further investigation of this matter. See also Myrick (1965), and Clark (July 1951: 200—204).

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ister, had none for his labor" (52: 24—26).¹⁶ The joke is not without ironic implication, because "those men, bringing in such a kind of eloquence, well may they obtain an opinion of a seeming fineness but persuade few, which should be the end of their fineness" (52: 26—28). The digression section of the essay itself is concluded with a humorous touch as when he says in his ironic apology to his audience, "But what? Methinks I deserve to be pounded for straying from poetry to oratory," which he has not done, to start with. Then, in a more serious vein, he adds, "... I think this digression will make my meaning receive the fuller understanding" (53: 28—31).

As for humour in the final section of the *Apology*, even the casual reader finds that it is a humorous peroration in its entirety. It should suffice, therefore, to cite just one example. Being considerate of his readers, "I conjure you" pleads Sidney smilingly, "all that have had the evil luck to read this ink-wasting toy of mine, even in the name of the nine Muses, no more to scorn the sacred mysteries of poesy ..." (55:6-9). Thus, the humorous mode fused with irony is employed to advance and confirm a serious plea.

The foregoing presentation of Sidney's *Defense* has demonstrated that humour is an important method by means of which multiple purposes are eventually accomplished. The contextual evidence found in the *Defense* attests to this fact which is also commensurate with Sidney's own conception of humour, his own belief in its aesthetic and rhetorical merits, and his admiration for Greek, Roman, and, of course, English authors who used humour, most of whom he quoted directly or indirectly in the essay itself, so much so that Sidney's method may be rightly termed a richly allusive method of humour. A perusal of Sidney's *Defense* has shown, moreover, that it is not a completely serious document or a literary sermon delivered by a moral arbiter or a sage literary dictator as some scholars have assumed, *nor* is it a frivolous laughing or farcical comedy as the present commentator might have mistakenly presumed. Rather, it is a literary document comprising serious pronouncements and arguments, but (fie on such a but) for good reason, it is tempered with humour and suffused with both poetic sensibility and comic spirit. Indeed, the entire work is informed and illuminated by a pleasant variety of humorous touches which are neither incidental nor imposed. On the contrary, humour is consciously employed (sometimes recurring with the same object) and sustained from first to last, to the effect that humorous remarks and references are artfully integrated with the author's arguments, counter-arguments, and viewpoints. As such, the multiple purposes accomplished as a result may be stated briefly as follows:

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- (i) To set the appropriate tone, to draw and maintain the attention of his audience and readers, thus relieving them from possible boredom as he progresses in his lengthy oration, and ultimately to win their approval;
- (ii) To suppress his moral indignation caused by attacks against poetry by setting a tone of relaxed, confident, and unlabored naturalness, and as such, to counter the malice, ingratitude, and the very style of his opponents;
- (iii) To illustrate a certain argument or viewpoint, and to correct certain faults, erroneous judgments, misconceptions, or wrong practices relating to poetry, prose, and drama;
- (iv) To disparage his ignorant or prejudiced opponents by means of the corrective lash of ridicule, to diminish the seriousness of their accusations, and to demolish their credibility by revealing their pretensions, extravagancies, and 'gross absurdities.'

By using humour that is often delightful and corrective, Sidney the critic means to please and to teach, just as a 'right' poet would. In fact, Sidney does more than this in the *Defense*. He aims to please his audience, to teach would-be poets and critics the true art of poetry, to move all concerned to believe in what he says, and, equally important, to displease his opponents and poet-haters by means of playful aggression.

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