

Head vs. heart: the legitimacy of moral truths in the works of philip sidney

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Since the Greek philosopher Plato banned them from his ideal commonwealth, poets such as Sir Philip Sidney have attempted to defend their work by arguing that poetry and its use of language combine the liveliness of history and the ethical focus of philosophy while simultaneously rousing readers to virtue. Plato believed that poets stirred up unworthy emotions that strayed from reason and logic, making poetry unnecessary and possibly detrimental to the stability of his harmonious society. Yet, Sir Philip Sidney persuasively combats these widespread claims against the legitimacy of poetry by arguing that poetry can be used as a guide for morality and virtue in his piece *The Defense of Poesy*. In particular, Sidney focuses on two of these controversies: “ First that there be many other fruitful knowledge’s that a man might better spend his time in them than in this. [And] Secondly, that it is the mother of lies”(967). While Sydney addresses his responses to each of these claims within this piece, more significantly, he uses the characterization of Astrophil in *Astrophil and Stella* and the comedic elements of *The Countess of Pembroke’s Arcadia* to exemplify his belief that the significance of fiction lies in its ability to imitate reality while teaching virtue.

In *Astrophil and Stella*, Sidney uses the characterization of Astrophil and his progression throughout the sonnets to reveal the virtuous lesson behind the piece. Throughout the majority of the work, Astrophil is obsessed with Stella’s beauty and his inability to make her fall in love with him. He reveals the source of his regret when he states, “ O me, I might,/ And then would not, or could not, see my bliss:/ Till now, wrapped in a most infernal night/ I find how heav’nly day, wretch, I did miss”(Sonnet 33 ll. 1-3). Sidney stresses

the importance of Astrophil's missed opportunity to make Stella fall in love with him before she married another man because this is the initial event that led Astrophil to his current state of misery. The fault lies entirely with Astrophil because he did not realize his love until it was too late, yet he still pines for her and immorally hopes that she will compromise her own virtue for his pleasure. It is not until Stella openly rejects Astrophil that he comes to the rational realization that his dreams will never come to fruition. His love for her was sinful from the start and not even Stella's affection for him can undo Astrophil's initial mistake.

The moral lesson that Astrophil learns in *Astrophil and Stella* exemplifies the kind of learning that Sidney states only poetry can teach in *The Defense of Poesy*. The first imputation that Sidney rejects in his answer to the charges against poetry is that there is more "fruitful knowledge" (967) to be learned than poetry. Sidney argues in response to this claim that "no learning is so good as that which teacheth and moveth to virtue; and none can both teach and move thereto so much as poetry" (967). Although history and philosophy are important aspects of education, Sidney believes that the emotional response involved in poetry inspires true learning that cannot be acquired elsewhere. By connecting with the character of Astrophil, the reader has the ability to put himself or herself in his position and learn not only rationally but also emotionally from his mistakes. Although Astrophil must live with his regret indefinitely, Sidney reveals that readers have the ability to recognize Astrophil's faults and therefore avoid the mistakes that he made in their own lives.

In *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*, Sidney incorporates the traditional elements of a comedy into his work to reveal the significance behind fiction as an imitation of reality. Although some elements of Sidney's plot, such as the continuous mistaken identity of Zeltane, seem somewhat unrealistic, they add to the idea that the importance of fiction lies in its ability to imitate reality rather than directly mirror it. Although the reader is not likely to find himself or herself in a situation similar to Gynecia's, her emotional torment brought about by her love of Zeltane strikes an emotional chord when she states " O virtue, where dost thou hide thyself? What hideous thing is this which doth eclipse thee?"(949). The reader does not need to fall in love with a man who is disguised as a woman (as Gynecia has) in order to emotionally understand what it feels like to love someone when that person is unattainable. In this sense, Sidney's fiction is not the lie that the second charge against fiction suggests it is in *The Defense of Poesy*. In response to this claim, Sidney states that " the poet never maketh any circles about your imagination to conjure you to believe for true what he writes"(968). Although truth can be found on an emotional level in *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*, Sidney never suggests that his story is a factual account of an event that occurred, and therefore is not a lie. Sidney, thus, reveals that the truth lies in a story's ability to mirror emotional responses.

Sidney successfully demonstrates that the significance of poetry and fiction lies in their ability to imitate rather than copy reality. Despite Plato's reasoning that poetry has no purpose in a rational and logical world, Sidney persuasively argues that people learn best when they are emotionally moved

by the subjects that they are being taught. Both of Sidney's works, *Astrophil and Stella* and *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*, inspire the reader to connect with the characters and plots in a way that history and philosophy could never imitate.