

The Renaissance

It was a fervent period of European cultural, artistic, political and economic “rebirth” following the Middle Ages. Generally described as taking place from the 14th century to the 17th century, the Renaissance promoted the rediscovery of classical philosophy, literature and art.

Philip Sidney (1554 – 1586): *Defence of Poesy*

Philip Sidney was the representative scholar, writer and gentleman of **Renaissance England**. He is considered to be the **first great English critic-poet**. He is remembered as one of the most prominent figures of **the Elizabethan age**.

An Apology for Poetry (published 1595; originally *Defence of Poesy*)

It is a work of literary criticism and the definitive formulation of Renaissance literary theory. With Sidney begins the English tradition and history of literary criticism.

It is generally believed that Sidney was at least partly **motivated by Stephen Gosson**, a former playwright who dedicated **his book, *The School of Abuse*, which attacks the English stage**, to Sidney in 1579. He was also motivated by the **attacks against poetry** by **Puritans**, who were English Reformed Protestants in the 16th and 17th centuries who sought to ‘purify’ the Church of England from its ‘Catholic’ practices.

Accusations of Puritans against poetry:

Puritans considered poetry as not useful because it tells untruths and leads to vice by arousing the passions echoing Plato’s accusations against poetry.

Sidney's defence of Poetry

Sidney borrows and tries to amend the theories of Plato, Aristotle, Horace and a few of his contemporary Italian critics. He begins his criticism by quoting from Aristotle 'Poesy therefore is an art of imitation, for so Aristotle terms it in his word **mimesis**'. He adds a Horatian note, declaring **poesy's chief end to be 'to teach and delight'**. **Similar to Aristotle, Sidney values poetry over history, law, and philosophy**. Poetry alone, he declares, is a teacher of virtue.

Sidney defends poetry against Plato's attacks and the view that it is a mindless or immoral activity. For Sidney, creative poetry is akin to religion because both guide and accomplish their purpose by stirring the emotions of the reader. By the essay's end, he places a curse on all those who do not love poetry.
