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Edited by Albert Feuillerat

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THE
DEFENCE OF
Poefie.

By Sir Phillip Sidney,
Knight.



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When the right vertuous *E. W.* and I, were at the Emperours Court together, wee gave our selves to learne horsemanship of *Jon Pietro Pugliano*, one that with great commendation had the place of an Esquire in his stable: and hee according to the fertlnes of the Italian wit, did not onely afford us the demonstration of his practise, but sought to enrich our mindes with the contemplations therein, which he thought most precious. But with none I remember mine eares were at any time more loaden, then when (either angred with slow paiement, or mooved with our learnerlike admiration) hee exercised his speech in the praise of his facultie. He said souldiers were the noblest estate of mankind, and horsemen the noblest of souldiers. He said they were the maisters of warre, and ornaments of peace, speedie goers, and strong abiders, triumphers both in Camps and Courts: nay to so unbleeved a point he proceeded, as that no earthly thing bred such wonder to a Prince, as to be a good horseman. Skill of government was but a *Pedanteria*, in comparison, then would he adde certaine praises by telling what a peerlesse beast the horse was, the onely serviceable Courtier without flattery, the beast of most bewtie, faithfulnessse, courage, and such more, that if I had not bene a peece of a *Logician* before I came to him, I thinke he would have perswaded me to have wished my selfe a horse. But thus much at least, with his no few words he drave into me, that selfelove is better then any guilding, to make that seem gorgeous wherin our selves be parties. Wherin if *Puglianos* strong affection and weake arguments will not satisfie you, I wil give you a nearer example of my selfe, who I know not by what mischance in these my not old yeares and idlest times, having slipt into the title of a Poet, am provoked to say something unto you in the defence of that my unelected vocation, which if I handle with more good will, then good reasons, beare with me, since the scholler is to be pardoned that followeth the steps of his maister. And yet I must say, that as I have more

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just cause to make a pittifull defence of poore Poetrie, which from almost the highest estimation of learning, is falne to be the laughing stocke of children, so have I need to bring some more availeable proofes, since the former is by no man bard of his deserved credit, the silly later, hath had even the names of *Philosophers* used to the defacing of it, with great daunger of civill warre among the Muses. And first trully to all them that professing learning envey against Poetrie, may justly be objected, that they go very neare to ungratefulnessse, to seeke to deface that which in the noblest nations and languages that are knowne, hath bene the first light giver to ignorance, and first nurse whose milke litle & litle enabled them to feed afterwards of tougher knowledges. And will you play the Hedgehogge, that being received into the den, drave out his host? Or rather the Vipers, that with their birth kill their parents? Let learned *Greece* in any of his manifold Sciences, be able to shew me one booke before *Musæus*, *Homer*, & *Hesiod*, all three nothing else but Poets. Nay let any Historie bee brought, that can say any writers were there before them, if they were not men of the same skill, as *Orpheus*, *Linus*, and some other are named, who having bene the first of that country that made pennes deliverers of their knowledge to the posteritie, nay justly challenge to bee called their Fathers in learning. For not onely in time they had this prioritie, (although in it selfe antiquitie be venerable) but went before them, as causes to draw with their charming sweetnessse, the wild untamed wits to an admiration of knowledge. So as *Ambion*, was said to moove stones with his Poetry, to build *Thebes*, and *Orpheus* to be listned to by beasts, indeed stonie and bestly people. So among the *Romans*, were *Livius*, *Andronicus*, and *Ennius*, so in the Italian language, the first that made it aspire to be a treasure-house of Science, were the Poets *Dante*, *Bocace*, and *Petrarch*. So in our English, wer *Gower*, and *Chawcer*, after whom, encoraged & delighted with their excellent foregoing, others have followed to bewtify our mother toong, aswel in the same kind as other arts. This did so notably shew it selfe, y^t the *Philosophers* of *Greece* durst not a lōg time appear to y^e world, but under y^e mask of poets. So *Thales*, *Empedocles*, and *Parmenides*, sang their naturall Philosophie in verses. So did *Pithagoras* and *Pbocillides*, their morall Councels. So did *Tirteus* in warre matters, and *Solon* in matters of pollicie,

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or rather they being Poets, did exercise their delightfull vaine in those points of highest knowledge, which before them laie hidden to the world. For, that wise *Solon* was directly a Poet, it is manifest, having written in verse the notable Fable of the *Atlantick* Iland, which was continued by *Plato*. And truly even *Plato* who so ever well considereth, shall finde that in the body of his worke though the inside & strength were Philosophie, the skin as it were and beautie, depended most of Poetrie. For all stands upon Dialogues, wherein hee faines many honest Burgresses of *Athens* speak of such matters, that if they had bene set on the Racke, they would never have confessed them: besides his Poeticall describing the circumstances of their meetings, as the well ordering of a banquet, the delicacie of a walke, with enterlacing meere tales, as *Gyges Ring* and others, which, who knows not to bee flowers of Poetrie, did never walke into *Appollos* Garden. And even *Historiographers*, although their lippes sound of things done, and veritie be written in their foreheads, have bene glad to borrow both fashion and perchance weight of the Poets. So *Herodotus* entituled his Historie, by the name of the nine Muses, and both he and all the rest that followed him, either stole, or usurped of Poetrie, their passionate describing of passions, the many particularities of battels which no man could affirme, or if that be denied me, long Orations put in the mouthes of great Kings and Captains, which it is certaine they never pronounced. So that truly neither *Philosopher*, nor *Historiographer*, could at the first have entered into the gates of populer judgements, if they had not taken a great passport of Poetrie, which in all nations at this day where learning flourisheth not, is plaine to be seene: in all which, they have some feeling of Poetry. In *Turkey*, besides their lawgiving Divines, they have no other writers but Poets. In our neighbour Countrey *Ireland*, where truly learning goes verie bare, yet are their Poets held in a devout reverence. Even among the most barbarous and simple *Indians*, where no writing is, yet have they their Poets who make & sing songs which they call *Arentos*, both of theyr Auncestors deeds, and praises of their Gods. A sufficient probability, that if ever learning come among them, it must be by having their hard dull wittes softened and sharpened with the sweete delights of Poetrie, for untill they finde a pleasure in the exercise of the minde, great promises of much knowledge, wil little

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persuade them that know not the frutes of knowledge. In *Wales*, the true remnant of the auncient *Brittons*, as there are good authorities to shew, the long time they had Poets which they called *Bardes*: so thorow all the cōquests of *Romans*, *Saxons*, *Danes*, and *Normans*, some of whom, did seeke to ruine all memory of learning from among them, yet do their Poets even to this day last: so as it is not more notable in the soone beginning, then in long continuing. But since the Authors of most of our Sciences, were the *Romanes*, and before them the *Greekes*, let us a litle stand upon their authorities, but even so farre as to see what names they have givē unto this now scorned skill. Among the *Romanes* a Poet was called *Vates*, which is as much as a diviner, foreseer, or Prophet, as by his conjoynd words *Vaticinium*, and *Vaticinari*, is manifest, so heavenly a title did that excellent people bestowe uppon this hart-ravishing knowledge, and so farre were they carried into the admiration thereof, that they thought in the chanceable hitting uppon any of such verses, great foretokens of their following fortunes were placed. Whereupon grew the word of *Sortes Vergilianæ*, when by suddaine opening *Virgils* booke, they lighted uppon some verse of his, as it is reported by many, whereof the Histories of the *Emperours* lives are full. As of *Albinus* the Governour of our Iland, who in his childhood met with this verse *Arma amens capio, nec sat rationis in armis*: and in his age performed it, although it were a verie vaine and godlesse superstition, as also it was, to thinke spirits were commaunded by such verses, whereupon this word *Charmes*, derived of *Carmina*, commeth: so yet serveth it to shew the great reverence those wittes were held in, and altogether not without ground, since both by the Oracles of *Delphos* and *Sybillas* prophesies, were wholly delivered in verses, for that same exquisite observing of number and measure in the words, and that high flying libertie of conceit proper to the Poet, did seeme to have some divine force in it. And may not I presume a litle farther, to shewe the reasonable-nesse of this word *Vatis*, and say that the holy *David's* Psalms are a divine *Poeme*? If I do, I shal not do it without the testimony of great learned mē, both auncient and moderne. But even the name of Psalmes wil speak for me, which being interpreted, is nothing but Songs: then that it is fully written in meeter as all learned *Hebritians* agree, although the rules be not

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yet fully found. Lastly and principally, his handling his prophetic, which is meerly Poeticall. For what else is the awaking his musical Instruments, the often and free chaunging of persons, his notable *Prosopopeias*, whē he maketh you as it were see God comming in his majestie, his telling of the beasts joyfulness, and hils leaping, but a heavenly poesie, wherin almost he sheweth himselfe a passionate lover of that unspeakable and everlasting bewtie, to be seene by the eyes of the mind, onely cleared by fayth? But truly now having named him, I feare I seeme to prophane that holy name, applying it to Poetry, which is among us throwne downe to so ridiculous an estimation. But they that with quiet judgements wil looke a litle deeper into it, shal find the end & working of it such, as being rightly applied, deserveth not to be scourged out of the Church of God. But now, let us see how the Greekes have named it, and how they deemed of it. The Greekes named him ποιητήν, which name, hath as the most excellent, gone through other languages, it commeth of this word ποιεῖν which is to make: wherin I know not whether by luck or wisdom, we Englishmen have met with the Greekes in calling him a Maker. Which name, how high and incomparable a title it is, I had rather were knowne by marking the scope of other sciences, thē by any partial allegatiō. There is no Art delivered unto mankind that hath not the workes of nature for his principall object, without which they could not consist, and on which they so depend, as they become Actors & Plaiers, as it were of what nature will have set forth. So doth the *Astronomer* looke upon the starres, and by that he seeth set downe what order nature hath taken therein. So doth the *Geometritian & Arithmititian*, in their divers sorts of quantities. So doth the *Musitians* in times tel you, which by nature agree, which not. The natural *Philosopher* thereon hath his name, and the morall *Philosopher* standeth upon the naturall vertues, vices, or passions of man: and follow nature saith he therein, and thou shalt not erre. The *Lawier* saith, what men have determined. The *Historian*, what men have done. The *Gramarian*, speaketh onely of the rules of speech, and the *Rhetoritian* and *Logitian*, considering what in nature wil soonest proove, and perswade thereon, give artificiall rules, which still are compassed within the circle of a question, according to the proposed matter. The *Phisitian* wayeth the nature of mans

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bodie, & the nature of things helpfull, or hurtfull unto it. And the *Metaphisicke* though it be in the second & abstract Notions, and therefore be counted supernaturall, yet doth hee indeed build upon the depth of nature. Onely the Poet disdeining to be tied to any such subjectiō, lifted up with the vigor of his own invention, doth grow in effect into an other nature: in making things either better then nature bringeth foorth, or quite a new, formes such as never were in nature: as the *Heroes*, *Demigods*, *Cyclops*, *Chymeras*, *Furies*, and such like; so as he goeth hand in hand with nature, not enclosed within the narrow warrant of her gifts, but freely raunging within the Zodiack of his owne wit. Nature never set foorth the earth in so rich Tapistry as diverse Poets have done, neither with so pleasaunt rivers, fruitfull trees, sweete smelling flowers, nor whatsoever els may make the too much loved earth more lovely: her world is brasen, the Poets only deliver a golden. But let those things alone and goe to man, for whom as the other things are, so it seemeth in him her uttermost comming is imploied: & know whether she have brought foorth so true a lover as *Theagenes*, so constant a friend as *Pylades*, so valiant a man as *Orlando*, so right a Prince as *Xenophons Cyrus*, so excellent a man every way as *Virgils Aeneas*. Neither let this be jestingly cōceived, bicause the works of the one be essenciall, the other in imitation or fiction: for everie understanding, knoweth the skill of ech Artificer standeth in that *Idea*, or fore conceit of the worke, and not in the worke it selfe. And that the Poet hath that *Idea*, is manifest, by delivering them foorth in such excellencie as he had imagined them: which delivering foorth, also is not wholly imaginative, as we are wont to say by thẽ that build Castles in the aire: but so farre substancially it worketh, not onely to make a *Cyrus*, which had bene but a particular excellency as nature might have done, but to bestow a *Cyrus* upon the world to make many *Cyrusses*, if they will learne aright, why and how that maker made him. Neither let it be deemed too sawcy a comparison, to ballance the highest point of mans wit, with the efficacie of nature: but rather give right honor to the heavenly maker of that maker, who having made man to his owne likenes, set him beyond and over all the workes of that second nature, which in nothing he sheweth so much as in Poetry; when with the force of a divine breath, he bringeth

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things forth surpassing her doings: with no small arguments to the incredulous of that first accursed fall of *Adam*, since our erected wit maketh us know what perfectiō is, and yet our infected wil keepeth us frō reaching unto it. But these argumēt̄s will by few be understood, and by fewer graunted: thus much I hope wil be given me, that the Greeks with some probability of reason, gave him the name above all names of learning. Now let us goe to a more ordinarie opening of him, that the truth may be the more palpable: and so I hope though we get not so unmatched a praise as the *Etimologie* of his names will graunt, yet his verie description which no man will denie, shall not justly be barred from a principall commendation. *Poesie* therefore, is an Art of *Imitation*: for so *Aristotle* termeth it in the word *μίμησις*, that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth to speake Metaphorically. A speaking *Picture*, with this end to teach and delight. Of this have bene three generall kindes, the chiefe both in antiquitie and excellencie, were they that did imitate the uncōceivable excellencies of God. Such were *David* in his *Psalmes*, *Salomon* in his song of songs, in his *Ecclesiastes*, and *Proverbes*. *Moses* and *Debora* in their Hymnes, and the wryter of *Jobe*: Which beside other, the learned *Emanuel Tremelius*, and *F. Junius*, doo entitle the Poeticall part of the scripture: against these none will speake that hath the holie Ghost in due holie reverence. In this kinde, though in a full wrong divinitie, were *Orpheus*, *Amphion*, *Homer* in his himnes, and manie other both *Greeke* and *Romanes*. And this *Poesie* must be used by whosoever will follow *S. Paules* counsaile, in singing *Psalmes* when they are mery, and I knowe is used with the frute of comfort by some, when in sorrowfull pages of their death bringing sinnes, they finde the consolation of the never leaving goodnes. The second kinde, is of them that deale with matters Philosophicall, either morall as *Tirteus*, *Phocilides*, *Cato*; or naturall, as *Lucretius*, and *Virgils Georgikes*; or Astronomicall as *Manilius* and *Pontanus*; or Historicall as *Lucan*: which who mislike the fault, is in their judgment quite out of tast, & not in the sweet food of sweetly uttered knowledge. But bicause this second sort is wrapped within the folde of the proposed subject, and takes not the free course of his own inventiō, whether they properly be Poets or no, let *Gramarians* dispute; and goe to the third indeed right Poets, of whom chiefly this question

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ariseth: betwixt whom and these second, is such a kinde of difference, as betwixt the meaner sort of Painters, who counterfeyt onely such faces as are set before them, and the more excelent, who having no law but wit, bestow that in colours upon you, which is fittest for the eye to see, as the constant, though lamenting looke of *Lucretia*, when shee punished in her selfe anothers faulte: wherein hee painteth not *Lucretia* whom he never saw, but painteth the outward bewty of such a vertue. For these third be they which most properly do imitate to teach & delight: and to imitate, borrow nothing of what is, hath bin, or shall be, but range onely reined with learned discretion, into the divine consideration of what may be and should be. These be they that as the first and most noble sort, may justly be termed *Vates*: so these are waited on in the excellentest languages and best understādings, with the fore described name of Poets. For these indeed do meerly make to imitate, and imitate both to delight & teach, and delight to move men to take that goodnesse in hand, which without delight they would flie as from a stranger; and teach to make them know that goodnesse wherunto they are moved; which being the noblest scope to which ever any learning was directed, yet want there not idle tongues to barke at them. These be subdivided into sundry more speciall denominations. The most notable be the *Heroick*, *Lyrick*, *Tragick*, *Comick*, *Satyrick*, *Iambick*, *Elegiack*, *Pastorall*, and certaine others: some of these being tearmed according to the matter they deale with, some by the sort of verse they liked best to write in, for indeed the greatest part of Poets have apparelled their poetickall inventions, in that numbrous kind of writing which is called *vers*. Indeed but apparelled verse: being but an ornament and no cause to Poetrie, since there have bene many excellent Poets that never versified, and now swarme many versifiers that need never answer to the name of Poets. For *Xenophon* who did imitate so excellently as to give us *effigiem justi imperii*, the pourtraiture of a just Empyre under the name of *Cyrus*, as *Cicero* saith of him, made therein an absolute heroicall Poeme. So did *Heliodorus*, in his sugred invention of that picture of love in *Theagenes & Chariclea*, and yet both these wrote in prose, which I speake to shew, that it is not ryming and versing that maketh a Poet, (no more then a long gown maketh an Advocate, who though he pleaded in Armour, should be an Advocat and