

BRIT. LIT.
VOLUME 3

GOLDEN AGE

SIR PHILIP SIDNEY
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE
EDMUND SPENSER

GOLDEN AGE

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GOLDEN AGE

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READING SCHEDULE

This volume should take you a grand total of thirty-five days, including two tests. Here's the official schedule:

DAY 1:	Reading 1 in this volume <i>Poetry Workbook: Lesson 27</i>	13
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THE GOLDEN AGE

Chaucer died in the year 1400, and for roughly the next 180 years there was not much to speak of in the world of English poetry. C.S. Lewis dubbed this era the Drab Age - not because the poetry was bad per se, but because during this time, English poetry had not yet really come into its own. Aside from Wyatt and Surrey (whose poems you are reading in the *Poetry Workbook*), there wasn't too terribly much of note. As C.S. Lewis puts it in his *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, "The grand function of the Drab Age poets was to build a firm metrical highway out of the late medieval swamp." Chaucer had pioneered a poetry style that worked really well in English, but the next several centuries were spent in working the bugs out of the system before anyone could really come along to make it sing.

But suddenly, in the late 16th century Elizabethan Age, there was an explosion of poetry in England, encompassing greats like Sidney, Spenser, Shakespeare, and many many others. This was the moment that English poetry came of age.

SIR PHILIP SIDNEY

1554-1586

Sir Philip Sidney was the spark who kicked off the Golden Age outburst of poetry, and he's the one we'll be studying first. To quote Lewis again:

Even at this distance Sidney is dazzling. He is that rare thing, the aristocrat in whom the aristocratic ideal is really embodied. Leicester's nephew, Pembroke's brother-in-law, and eligible parti for a princess, painted by Veronese, poet and patron of poets, statesman, knight, captain - fate has dealt such hands before, but they have very seldom been so well played.

Sidney truly had it all. He was wealthy, aristocratic, handsome, educated, charming, and everyone loved him. He was a favorite in Elizabeth's court, much sought after by fathers of eligible ladies, and a distinguished poet. He attended Oxford University, but when he finished his education there at age seventeen, he left without taking a degree. (That would have been a bit plebian for someone of his birth.) He was offered the crown of Poland at age twenty-three, but turned it down, saying that he preferred to be "a subject to Queen Elizabeth than a sovereign beyond the seas."

He spent a lot of time on the continent, and was actually in Paris during the slaughter of the Huguenots at the St. Bartholomew Day Massacre where thousands of French Protestants were brutally murdered. He was eighteen. As Sidney was fiercely Protestant, this was a very formative moment for him. From then on he would devote a good bit of his time and effort in trying to persuade England to go to war with the Catholics. He conducted some secret missions in Europe for Queen Elizabeth, trying to put together a Protestant League which would be able to take on the Catholic countries, and he even tried to convince Elizabeth to launch a direct assault on Spain. In a random and interesting twist, the king of Spain, King Phillip II, was Sidney's god-father, for whom he was named.

Sidney was too much of a hot-head for Elizabeth. She wanted to be very careful to not rock the boat - and Sidney was 300% in favor of boat-rocking of the most flamboyant kind. He was young, he was a soldier, and he wanted to start a world war. Eventually Elizabeth sent him to his estate in the country to take a time-out for a while and cool down. It was during this time that Sidney wrote the *Defense of Poesy*, and throughout it you can sense his frustration with being cooped up and writing rather than out fighting.

Sidney secretly arranged to sail to Cadiz with Drake, but before they left, Queen Elizabeth gave in and let him lead troops to Holland to fight the Spanish Catholics there. Sidney was shot in the leg at the Battle of Zutphen. His thigh bone was shattered and he died of gangrene several weeks later at the age of 31.

Hopefully you will have noticed that Sidney was much more than just a poet. Primarily, he was a courtier and a soldier. However, his impact on English literature has been his lasting legacy. He wrote the first sonnet sequence the English language had ever seen with *Astrophil and Stella*, which you'll be reading selections of in the *Poetry Workbook*. He also wrote *Arcadia*, *Defense of Poesy*, and began a versification of the Psalms which his sister completed after his death. He was friends with, and literary patron of, Edmund Spenser, and Spenser dedicated the *Shepherd's Calendar* to him.

Although Sidney died quite young, he had a huge impact on English literature, and he was the flamboyant spark that kicked off the Golden Age of English Literature.

DEFENSE OF POESY

You'll be reading *Defense of Poesy* over the course of the next six days, and it's entirely possible that you'll be bored out of your brains. The thing is, it's a bit philosophical, he's talking *about* poetry rather than speaking *in* poetry, and it's in Elizabethan English. That right there is enough to be the kiss of death for many people.

However, if you're willing to throw your back into it and give it some effort, *Defense of Poesy* is actually incredibly fun. Sidney is witty, funny, profound, scathing, and eloquent, and there are a lot of very interesting undercurrents in it. And if you're interested at all in writing, poetry, music, or movies, this is a very important work for you to wrap your head around. Sidney's insights are still incredibly relevant today.

As you read, try and remember what kind of guy Sidney was - that should help to make what he has to say more interesting. Don't picture a weedy philosophy prof reading this through his nose. Instead, imagine a young guy in his twenties who is intimidatingly good looking and athletic. (Boys - he could totally beat you up. One of the reasons he was tossed out of Elizabeth's court was for challenging one of her favorite noblemen

to a duel - one she didn't want to lose.) Now imagine that he's insanely wealthy. And aristocratic. And a military officer. But also charming. And extremely well dressed. Intensely opinionated, with an overwhelming personality. Also ridiculously smart. Went to Oxford. Has travelled everywhere, and is friends with the royal families of all of Europe. Knows Latin, Greek, Hebrew, French, Italian, and Dutch. (At least.) Basically, he has pretty much out-classed you every which way it's possible to be out-classed. Now imagine *that* guy is going to tell you why poetry is important. Hopefully you'll at least hear him out.

Before you start, there are a couple things you should know by way of context. The ancient Greek philosopher Plato, in his *Republic*, was quite rude about poets. In fact, he said that he would ban all poets from his ideal state. I'm sure you remember the whole thing with Plato and his "forms." He believed that all of the material world was a mere shadow and true reality was elsewhere - up in the mysterious Realm of the Forms. He believed that we're already living in darkness, and poets take us one step further into the dark. If the material world is just a picture, then poets are giving us a picture of a picture - a shadow of a shadow. According to Plato, only the philosophers truly see the world for what it is, and through the teachings of the philosophers, we too can be enlightened. Poets, on the other hand, only lead us further away from the truth.

In Book X of the *Republic*, Plato issued a challenge to poets. He said that until someone could defend poetry, *and do it in prose*, poetry would remain banished from his state. He would not listen to any argument for poetry that was made *in* poetry - no, if a poet was going to plead his case to Plato, he would have to do it plainly, in prose, with no poetical funny business.

It's interesting then, that Sidney decided to write a philosophical paper, defending poetry. It's as though, frustrated with not being allowed to declare war on Spain, and stewing in his massive estate in the country, he decided to pick up the gauntlet that the most famous philosopher of all time had thrown down thousands of years before. Why not? Who better

to pick up Plato's gauntlet than Sidney?

One other bit of background information. A short while before Sidney wrote this, a man named Stephen Gosson wrote a little book called *The School of Abuse*, which he dedicated to Sir Philip Sidney. That in itself wasn't out of the ordinary - people all over Europe were dedicating their books to Sidney. But Gosson's book was an attack on poets and poetry - which he referred to as the "school of abuse." Friends recalled Sidney being quite outraged at the book, but he never even acknowledged its existence in his writing. However, the fact that the book was dedicated to him quite possibly added to Sidney's motivation to write something in defense of poetry.

Here's a sample quote from *The School of Abuse* so that you can see the kind of attack that Sidney was responding to.

Pull off the visor that Poets mask in, you shall disclose their reproach, betray their vanity, loathe their wantonness, lament their folly, and perceive their sharp sayings to be placed as peerless in dunghills, fresh pictures on rotten walls, chaste matrons' apparel on common courtesans. These are the cups of Circe that turn reasonable creatures into brute beasts, the balls of Hippomenes, that hinder the course of Atalanta, and the blocks of the Devil that are cast in our ways to cut off the race of toward wits. No marvel though Plato shut them out of his school and banished them completely from his commonwealth as effeminate writers, unprofitable members, and utter enemies to virtue.

You can see why Sidney decided to say something.

One last note: Sidney's whole argument is arranged in the classical rhetorical structure, and if you've ever taken rhetoric then you will recognize it. It should be noted, however, that the headings were not there in the original - they are only added in this edition so that you can see what Sidney was doing.

DEFENSE OF POESY

SIR PHILIP SIDNEY

DEFENSE OF POESY

Exordium

** In classical rhetoric, the exordium is the introduction to the speech, in which the speaker establishes credibility (ethos), and announces the subject and purpose of his discourse.*

When the right virtuous Edward Wotton and I were at the Emperor's court together, we gave ourselves to learn horsemanship of Gio. Pietro Pugliano; one that, with great commendation, had the place of an esquire in his stable; and he, according to the fertility of the Italian wit, did not only afford us the demonstration of his practice, but sought to enrich our minds with the contemplation therein, which he thought most precious. But with none, I remember, mine ears were at any time more laden, than when (either angered with slow payment, or moved with our learner-like admiration) he exercised his speech in the praise of his faculty.

He said, soldiers were the noblest estate of mankind, and horsemen the noblest of soldiers. He said, they were the masters of war and ornaments of peace, speedy goers, and strong abiders, triumphers both in camps and courts; nay, to so unbeliev'd 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 add certain praises by tell-

What a great beginning. "So anyways, when I was staying with the emperor . . ."

The esquire is the man who has charge of all the emperor's horses. He was also a teacher at the Imperial Riding School in Vienna.

Pugliano was so passionate about horses that he talked about horsemanship all the time.

In this intro, Sidney is funny and self-deprecating. He explains that through Pugliano he realized that passion for your subject is better than any gilding to make something seem gorgeous.

Sidney, like Pugliano is going to defend his chosen passion. But in this section we can sense his irritation. He refers to poetry as his "unelected vocation" - and also mentions that he's young but for some reason idle. (He'd rather be starting a war.)

Since Urania was the Muse for philosophers, Sidney is pointing out that when philosophers object to poetry, it's as if there's a civil war among the Muses.

ing what a peerless beast the horse was, the only serviceable courtier, without flattery, the beast of most beauty, faithfulness, courage, and such more, that if I had not been a piece of a logician before I came to him, I think he would have persuaded me to have wished myself a horse. But thus much, at least, with his no few words, he drove into me, that self love is better than any gilding, to make that seem gorgeous wherein ourselves be parties.

Wherein, if Pugliano's strong affection and weak arguments will not satisfy you, I will give you a nearer example of myself, who, I know not by what mischance, in these my not old years and idlest times, having slipped 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 than good reasons, bear with me, since the scholar is to be pardoned that followeth the steps of his master.

And yet I must say, that as I have more just cause to make a pitiful defence of poor poetry, which, from almost the highest estimation of learning, is fallen to be the laughing-stock of children; so have I need to bring some more available proofs, since the former is by no man barred of his deserved credit, whereas the silly latter hath had even the names of philosophers used to the defacing of it, with great danger of civil war among the Muses.

Narratio

* *The second part of a classical oration, following the exordium. The speaker provides a narrative account of what has happened and generally explains the nature of the case.*

At first, truly, to all them that, professing learning, inveigh against poetry, may justly be objected, that they go very near to ungratefulness to seek to deface that which, in the noblest nations and languages that are known, hath been the first light-giver to ignorance, and first nurse, whose milk by little and little enabled them to feed afterwards of tougher knowledges. And will you play the hedgehog, that being received into the den, drove out his host? Or rather the vipers, that with their birth kill their parents? Let learned Greece, in any of her manifold sciences, be able to show me one book before Musaeus, Homer, and Hesiod, all three nothing else but poets. Nay, let any history he brought that can say any writers were there before them, if they were not men of the same skill, as Orpheus, Linus, and some others are named, who having been the first of that country that made pens deliverers of their knowledge to posterity, may justly challenge to be called their fathers in learning. For not only in time they had this priority (although in itself antiquity be venerable) but went before them as causes to draw with their charming sweetness the wild untamed wits to an admiration of knowledge. So as Amphion was said to move stones with his poetry to build Thebes, and Orpheus to be listened to by beasts, indeed, stony and beastly people, so among the Romans were Livius Andronicus, and Ennius; so in the Italian language, the first that made it to aspire

Point 1: *In every great nation, the poets came prior to any other philosophical disciplines and prepare the culture for further and more difficult knowledge. To then turn on the poets smacks of ingratitude. The poets prepare the soil by charming untamed wits into an admiration of knowledge.*

He gives examples from Greece, Italy, and England.

to be a treasure-house of science, were the poets Dante, Boccace, and Petrarch; so in our English were Gower and Chaucer; after whom, encouraged and delighted with their excellent foregoing, others have followed to beautify our mother tongue, as well in the same kind as other arts.

Point 2: *He argues that the earliest philosophers always teach in the form of story. He lists off several, and even includes Plato . . . ironic for him to be calling Plato a poet.*

This is a jab he never gets tired of. Plato, who opposed poets, taught his philosophy by means of stories and dialogues - which, Sidney argues, is poetry. He's further insulting by pointing out what good poetry it is.

This did so notably show itself that the philosophers of Greece durst not a long time appear to the world but under the mask of poets; so Thales, Empedocles, and Parmenides sang their natural philosophy in verses; so did Pythagoras and Phocylides their moral counsels; so did Tyrtaeus in war matters; and Solon in matters of policy; or rather they, being poets, did exercise their delightful vein in those points of highest knowledge, which before them lay hidden to the world; for that wise olon was directly a poet it is manifest, having written in verse the notable fable of the Atlantic Island, which was continued by Plato. And, truly, even Plato, whosoever well considereth shall find that in the body of his work, though the inside and strength were philosophy, the skin, as it were, and beauty depended most of poetry. For all stands upon dialogues; wherein he feigns many honest burgesses of Athens speaking of such matters that if they had been set on the rack they would never have confessed them; besides, his poetical describing the circumstances of their meetings, as the well-ordering of a banquet, the delicacy of a walk, with interlacing mere tiles, as Gyges's Ring, and others; which, who knows not to be flowers of poetry, did never walk into Apollo's garden.

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; so Herodotus entituled the books of

his history by the names of the Nine Muses; and both he, and all he rest that followed him, either stole or usurped, of poetry, their passionate describing of passions, he many particularities of battles which no man could affirm; or, if that be denied me, long orations, put in the mouths of great kings and captains, which it is certain they never pronounced. So that, truly, neither philosopher nor historiographer could, at the first, have entered into the gates of popular judgments, if they had not taken a great disport of poetry; which in all nations, at this day, where learning flourisheth not, is plain to be seen; 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-country Ireland, where, too, learning goes very 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 and sing songs, which they call *Areytos*, both of their ancestor's deeds and praises of their gods. A sufficient probability, that if ever learning comes among them, it must be by having their hard dull wits softened and sharpened with the sweet delight of poetry; for until they find a pleasure in the exercise of the mind, great promises of much knowledge will little persuade them that know not the fruits of knowledge. In Wales, the true remnant of the ancient Britons, as there are good authorities to show the long time they had poets, which they called bards, so through all the conquests of Romans, Saxons, Danes, and Normans, some of whom did seek to ruin 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 soon beginning than in long-continuing.

Point 3:

Historians are also poets. They tell their histories through stories which are not technically accurate in every detail. They embellish in order that we may understand better. Thus, both philosophers and historians owe their success to poetry.

Point 4:

All primitive cultures have poets. Once they develop in learning, it will be due to the foundational work of the poets.

Point 5: *All of Britain's "sciences" came from the Romans and the Greeks. Therefore, let's go back and find out what they thought about poetry.*

A. The Romans called their poets "Vates" which means prophet. This shows us in what reverence they held their poets.

But since the authors of most of our sciences were the Romans, and before them the Greeks, let us, a little, stand upon their authorities; but even so far, as to see what names they have given unto this now scorned skill.

Among the Romans a poet was called *Vates*, which is as much as a diviner, foreseer, or prophet, as by his conjoined words *vaticinium*, and *vaticinari*, is manifest; so heavenly a title did that excellent people bestow upon this heart-ravishing knowledge! And so far were they carried into the admiration thereof, that they thought in the changeable hitting upon any such verses, great foretokens of their following fortunes were placed. Whereupon grew the word of *Sortes Virgilianae*; when, by sudden opening Virgil's book, they lighted upon some verse, as it is reported by many, whereof the histories of the Emperors' lives are full. As of Albinus, the governor of our island, who, in his childhood, met with this verse -

*Arma amens capio, nec sat rationis in armis*¹

and in his age performed it. Although it were a very vain and godless superstition; as also it was, to think spirits were commanded by such verses; whereupon this word charms, derived of *carmina*,² cometh, so yet serveth it to show the great reverence those wits were held in; and altogether not without ground, since both the oracles of Delphi and the Sibyl's prophecies were wholly delivered in verses; for that same exquisite observing of number

¹ *From the Aeneid 2:314: "Madly I take up arms, though arms are useless now."*

² *songs*

and measure in the words, and that high-flying liberty of conceit proper to the poet, did seem to have some divine force in it.

And may not I presume a little farther to show the reasonableness of this word *Vates*, and say, that the holy David's Psalms are a divine poem? If I do, I shall not do it without the testimony of great learned men, both ancient and modern. But even the name of Psalms will speak for me, which, being interpreted, is nothing but Songs; then, that is fully written in metre, as all learned Hebricians agree, although the rules be not yet fully found. Lastly, and principally, his handling his prophecy, which is merely poetical. For what else is the awaking his musical instruments; the often and free changing of persons; his notable *prosopopoeias*³, when he maketh you, as it were, see God coming in His majesty; his telling of the beasts' joyfulness, and hills leaping; but a heavenly poesy, wherein, almost, he sheweth himself a passionate lover of that unspeakable and everlasting beauty, to be seen by the eyes of the mind, only cleared by faith? But truly, now, having named him, I fear I seem to profane that holy name, applying it to poetry, which is, among us, thrown down to so ridiculous an estimation. But they that, with quiet judgments, will look a little deeper into it, shall find the end and 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 Greeks have named it, and how they deemed of it. The Greeks named him *poieten*⁴ which name hath, as the most excellent, gone through

B. The Romans may have been on to something by calling their poets prophets. The Psalms are poetry, and also prophetic. If David delivered prophecies of Christ in poetry, then surely poetry deserves a place in the church.

³ *personifications*

⁴ *maker*

C. The Greeks called their poets poieten which means "maker." This is where we get the English word "poet." Notice how this fits with the Old English concept of the scope.

D. Every other discipline is tied to Nature and dependant upon it. (Scientists, mathematicians, rhetoricians, physicians - everyone is bound by Nature.) Only the poet can transcend nature, improve upon Nature, and invent what was never found in Nature.

other languages; it cometh of this word *poiein*, which is *to make*; wherein, I know not whether by luck or wisdom, we Englishmen have met with the Greeks in calling him "a maker," which name, how high and incomparable a title it is, I had rather were known by marking the scope of other sciences, than by any partial allegation.

There is no art delivered unto mankind that hath not the works of nature for his principal object, without which they could not consist, and on which they so depend as they become actors and players, as it were, of what nature will have set forth. So doth the astronomer look upon the stars, and by that he seeth set down what order nature hath taken therein. So doth the geometrician and arithmetician, in their diverse sorts of quantities. So doth the musician, in times, tell you which by nature agree, which not. The natural philosopher thereon hath his name; and the moral philosopher standeth upon the natural virtues, vices, or passions of man; and follow nature, saith he, therein, and thou shalt not err. The lawyer saith what men have determined. The historian, what men have done. The grammarian speaketh only of the rules of speech; and the rhetorician and logician, considering what in nature will soonest prove and persuade, thereon give artificial rules, which still are compassed within the circle of a question, according to the proposed matter. The physician weigheth the nature of man's body, and the nature of things helpful and hurtful unto it. And the metaphysic, though it be in the second and abstract notions, and therefore be counted supernatural, yet doth he, indeed, build upon the depth of nature.

Only the poet, disdainng to be tied to any such subjection, lifted up with the vigour of his own inven-

tion, doth grow, in effect, into another nature; in making things either better than nature bringeth forth, or quite anew; forms such as never were in nature, as the heroes, demi-gods, Cyclops, chimeras, furies, and such like; so as he goeth hand in hand with Nature, not enclosed within the narrow warrant of her gifts, but freely ranging within the zodiac of his own wit.

Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as divers poets have done; neither with so pleasant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet-smelling flowers, nor whatsoever else may make the too-much-loved earth more lovely; her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden. But let those things alone, and go to man; for whom as the other things are, so it seemeth in him her uttermost cunning is employed; and know, whether she have brought forth so true a lover as Theagenes; so constant a friend as Pylades; so valiant a man as Orlando; so right a prince as Xenophon's Cyrus; and so excellent a man every way as Virgil's Æneas? Neither let this be jestingly conceived, because the works of the one be essential, the other in imitation or fiction; for every understanding knoweth the skill of each artificer standeth in that idea, or fore-conceit of the work, and not in the work itself. And that the poet hath that idea is manifest by delivering them forth in such excellency as he had imagined them; which delivering forth, also, is not wholly imaginative, as we are wont to say by them that build castles in the air; but so far substantially it worketh not only to make a Cyrus, which had been but a particular excellency, as nature might have done; but to bestow a Cyrus upon the world to make many Cyruses; if they will learn aright, why, and how, that maker made him.

E. There are many characters in the poets who are far nobler than any human ever was. However, when a poet creates a noble character in verse - it actually can create that noble character in reality when the reader learns by example. The poet shapes the poem, but more importantly, the poet shapes the reader by means of the poem.

F. God is the Maker. When we create, we are most like him. This is an argument that few will understand, and even fewer will grant.

Neither let it be deemed too saucy a comparison to balance the highest point of man's wit with the efficacy of nature; but rather give right honour to the heavenly Maker of that maker, who having made man to His own likeness, set him beyond and over all the works of that second nature; which in nothing he showeth so much as in poetry; when, with the force of a divine breath, he bringeth 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 perfection is, and yet our infected will keepeth us from reaching unto it. But these arguments will by few be understood, and by fewer granted; thus much I hope will be given me, that the Greeks, with some probability of reason, gave him the name above all names of learning.

Now let us go to a more ordinary 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 etymology of his names will grant, yet his very description, which no man will deny, shall not justly be barred from a principal commendation.

Propositio

** Quintillian adds this section immediately after the Narratio: a summary of the issues or a statement of the charge.*

This is very important so read it carefully - it's where Sidney defines his terms.

Poesy, therefore, is an art of imitation; for so Aristotle termeth it in the word *mimesis*; that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth: to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture, with this end, to teach and delight. (Of this have been three general kinds.)

READING I
QUESTIONS

Make sure you double check your answers in the back of the book.

1. Compare Sidney's concept of the poet with the Saxon scope.
2. Explain Sidney's argument that he says few will understand and even fewer will grant.
3. What do you think of Sidney's argument that the poet shapes reality when he shapes his poetry? How does that apply to us?
4. According to Sidney's definition of poesy, what sorts of things would be included under that heading?