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The Defenders of poesy: Philip Sidney and Charles Dickens

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## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	1
Bibliography.....	5

## Abstract

Poetry's worth has long been contested. Throughout the years, many intellectuals attacked its value and called for its banishment. They believed imaginative novels, stories, and poems, to contain a corruptive force within them, one which undermines the capacity for rational discourse, and thus threatens society. In order to convince readers otherwise, Philip Sidney wrote *The Defense of Poesy*, an analytical essay which tackles those discipline that claims superiority to poetry. Playing by the attackers' rules, Sidney mimics the structure of a formal essay rather than that of a novel or a poem. Over the years, the *Defense* has become one of the most forceful pieces on behalf of poetry, and a source of inspiration for many great writers. Sidney's *Defense*, as I will later show, encouraged writers to defend poetry as he once did, using his method in their own writings. The *Defense* was an inspired opening shot that has forged a Sidnean Tradition, while in its heart standing an esquire and a horse, the Sidnean defender of poetry.

Sidney's *Defense* famously begins with a tale about John Pietro Pugliano, the horseman who could persuade his listeners to desire to become a horse, giving his persuading speech and his profound admiration of horses. Most critics have dismissed the opening as irrelevant to the formal project of the work, but I understand it as an integral, an extending allegory to Sidney's main argument throughout his whole defense, a short exordium that captures both the spirit and message of his entire treatise by poetry's educative force. Sidney's exordium concludes the entire *Defense* and sets forth the strategy of Sidney's formal work: what one may attempt to clarify throughout a whole defense, a tale (Pugliano) demonstrates in one short passage.

The tale of Pugliano's horse is deliberately there for other writers who may read through the Sidnean enigma, being able to interpret the use and importance of the horse, and thus to harness it in their turn to defend poetry. The offenders, who dismiss the necessity of such a writing or its nature, cannot observe the implication of such a tale nor detect Sidney's stratagem; Sidney creates an association between the scorned poetry and the sixteenth-century admirable horse. The horse, according to Sidney's analogy, becomes an emblem of poetry, fancy, and imagination. Sidney portrays how a horse is just a horse – an object, while a bad writer can abuse it and a bad reader may transform it through observation and interpretation. Sidney uses Pugliano as an agent of false impression reading might cause and the presenter of what Sidney later defines as the "poet-ape." Sidney, in that case, steps into the shoes of the reader; Pugliano praises the horse to the extent that Sidney claims: "I think he would have persuaded me to have wished myself a horse" (19-20) if he hadn't been wise enough to discern the false impression of such claims, without any rational support beyond them. Hence, how one perceives the horse (poetry) and what meaning he derives out of it lies under his or her own responsibility, while the same applies for literature.

Sidney's symbol of the horse initiates an affiliation with a tradition defending poetry in later writers such as Jane Austen (*Northanger Abbey*), George Eliot (*The Lifted Veil*), and particularly Charles Dickens (*Hard Times*). In my proposed work, I not only show how the horse episode is integral to Sidney's argument as a whole, but also how these three writers apply Sidnean theories in their novels due to the increased interest in Sidney in the nineteenth-century. Dickens, who took it the furthest of the three in his novel *Hard Times*, uses the emblem of the horse to signal his affiliation with Sidney's tradition and purpose by extending 'horse conversations' throughout his novel and the use of "Sleary's Horsemanship." In this work, I will clarify Dickens's use

of the horse throughout his narrative (and metanarrative) and the implications of Gradgrind's utilitarian party who attempts to define the horse while extracting any fanciful aspect out of it. Dickens, like Sidney, ties the horse to the world of Fancy and constructs it as the defender of poetry, an oasis of imagination in his dystopian, industrial Coketown.

I would go further and claim that *Hard Times* intends, by a hidden thematic layer in its narrative, to mimic Sidney's *Defense*, thus establishing poetry's worth by creating a defective, dysfunctional world of facts. Dickens restores the credibility of the writer, demonstrates poetry's educative force upon its audience, and shows the tremendous importance of it to our society. To pursue that cause, Dickens provides an inferior alternative for the audience, creating a world of Facts that forbids Fancy's existence. Dickens implants Sidney's arguments and references throughout his narrative, in the form of characters, by their speeches and actions. Thus Dickens breathes life into Sidney's formal work and portrays the consequences of such a world that lacks Fancy. By doing so, Dickens completes Sidney's attempt to prove poetry's importance. *Hard Times* is a fulfillment of Sidney's vision, but in reverse, portraying an impoverished world of facts, a living example of a world that dismisses and refuses to recognize the importance of fancy, and thus fails.

This thesis attempts to investigate the Sidnean horse and its varied implications while showing the use of the nineteenth-century authors in the horse as their defender. The work, of course, will focus mostly on Dickens, articulating the highly charged connections between Sidney and Dickens by demonstrating Dickens' familiarity with Sidney's works and proving his profound admiration for him. This work will also trace the history of the horse figured as a totem and examine its earlier literary roots, such as the Trojan Horse in classical epic, and its metaphoric function in Plato's *Apology*,

illustrating the conversation Sidney took part in while continuing a tradition of comparing the writer with the rider, and forging a legacy in the process. I will relate to Sidney's use of the horse as an allegory for literature to be a device that may lead (like a horse), when properly appreciated, to a fuller understanding of life and experience, while its mistreatment may lead to deformed, unwanted reality. Finally, I will compare Sidney's horse with that of Dickens, and trace Dickens' transformation of his antecedent, how he imitates Sidney's *Defense* by employing the same references, imagery, religious content, specific iconic characters, and above all, the representatives of parallel disciplines: the (utilitarian) philosopher, the (partial) historian, as well as other professions that are mentioned in the *Defense*.

*Hard Times* shows that Fancy – and thus Poetry – (generated by Sissy Jupe) is the healthiest of all the disciplines. At the very end of *Hard Time*, Dickens himself intrudes into the narrative, and calls upon the reader to judge which way is right: “Dear reader! It rests with you and me, whether, in our two fields of action, similar things shall be or not. Let them be! We shall sit with lighter bosoms on the hearth, to see the ashes of our fires turn grey and cold” (234). By doing so, Dickens establishes (and directs towards) space for an educational process for the readers rather than leaving *Hard Times* as a mere means of entertainment; that is, following Sidney, he both teaches and delights. Dickens places the readers in front of a deformed mirror which sends them into his own version of Wonderland, but one that lacks Wonder. It is an estranged world, a mechanical alternative, through which, just like Louisa, one can truly ponder: without Fancy,

“*what does it matter?*”

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