

Reason in Luther, Calvin, and Sidney

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The poetry and literary theory of Sir Phillip Sidney have become a focal point for a broader investigation of the interaction between humanism and reformation. Elizabethan England, according to some literary scholars, was a battleground between these "incompatible" forces. This study seeks to modify this forced dichotomy by showing that humanism and Protestantism were not at odds. It focuses on Luther and Calvin, and demonstrates that their views on learning and human reason were more differentiated than the blanket condemnation they often are accused of. A second objective is to show that Sidney's poetics largely conform to the guidelines on reason set down by the reformers.

THE POETRY AND LITERARY THEORY of Sir Philip Sidney have become a focal point for a broader investigation of the interaction between humanism and reformation. In a recent study I elaborated Sidney's claim, in the *Defence of Poesie*, that "right" poetry leads to the "purifying of wit" (82).¹ Basing myself on the *Defence*, I argued the central importance of human reason in the Sidneian poetics. But what about the Protestant impact on Sidney's thinking? Does not my emphasis clash with the express views of the reformers? Had not Luther, after all, called reason "the devil's whore," and did not Calvin posit the total depravity of both human will and intellect? In other words, does the Protestant testimony invalidate my conclusions or, alternately, was Sidney a humanist at heart, with only a thin coat of reformed varnish?

If we are to believe those scholars who have taken the impact of the Reformation seriously, Elizabethan England was a battleground between two warring and incompatible forces. "The dominant mode of Christian thought in Sidney's England was Calvinism," John Carey rightly asserts, but then goes on to claim uncompromisingly: "like Sophoclean fatalism, [it] encouraged a belief in the blindness and ignorance of mankind and the irretrievable wrongness of human reason."² Alan Sinfield, in a better informed analysis of English Protestant literature, shows greater discrimi-

¹Åke Bergvall, *The "Enabling of Judgement": Sir Philip Sidney and the Education of the Reader* (Stockholm: Almqvist, 1989). All citations from the *Defence* will be taken from *Miscellaneous Prose of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones and Jan van Dorsten (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973) and will be cited by page number in the text.

²John Carey, "Structure and Rhetoric in Sidney's *Arcadia*," *Sir Philip Sidney: An Anthology of Modern Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 249

nation, but with his emphasis on the fatalistic features of Calvinism and its inherent "contradictories" he too gives little credit to any humanist space provided by the reformers.³

A basic premise of this article is to modify the forced dichotomy between reformer and humanist. Humanism (at least in its northern form) and Protestantism were not naturally or inexorably at odds. The perceived antagonism is largely a matter of definition. Sinfield, for example, creates a built-in clash by claiming that "Humanism values humanity for itself and finds the divine in it, usually in the exalted reason."⁴ Yet would a Vives or an Erasmus find the divine in humanity or in human reason? We are surely on safer ground if we follow Paul Oscar Kristeller's suggestion that the humanists were teachers and students of the "humanities," the *studia humanitatis*.⁵ If we do, much of the tension evaporates. The reformer based his critique of the religious status quo on the philological labor of the professional humanist,⁶ and indeed the two were not seldom combined in one and the same person. Luther may perhaps only tenuously be called a humanist, yet he was a scholar by profession and his brilliant German translation of the Bible was certainly a humanist undertaking.⁷ And Calvin, Zwingli, and Melancthon were all professional humanists before they became reformers.

I will focus on Luther and Calvin, and will demonstrate that their views on human reason were much more differentiated than the blanket condemnation they all too often are accused of. A second objective of the paper will be to show that Sidney's poetics, as expressed in the *Defence* and put into practice in the *Arcadia*, largely conform to the guidelines on reason set down by the reformers. My first aim is not a novel undertaking. Indeed, Reformation theologians and historians have put the record straight for

³Alan Sinfield, *Literature in Protestant England 1560-1660* (London: Croom Helm, 1983), esp. 7-33.

⁴Sinfield, *Literature in Protestant England*, 21. Sinfield rightly asserts that Protestantism insists upon "the gap between human and divine" (but so does northern humanism), but he then resorts to stereotypes when he claims that Protestantism "regards pagan and secular literature as inevitably fallible and insignificant" (21; my emphasis). With these definitions one is predestined to find "contradictories" in Elizabethan literature.

⁵Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought: The Classic, Scholastic, and Humanist Strains* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 8-11. It is true that Charles Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), xv, while agreeing to the "general validity" of Kristeller's definition, broadens it to include the humanists' commitment to voluntarism and rhetoric. Yet, as he himself admits, this means he has to exclude "those other humanists whose scholarly activities remained strictly philological." Even if we accept Trinkaus's definition, we still have to recognize that both the humanists and the reformers were following Augustine, for whom voluntarism was a central tenet. Even Luther, whatever he may have said about free will in heated debate with Erasmus, based his reformation on the volitional change caused by suasive preaching.

⁶See Jerry H. Bentley, *Humanists and Holy Writ* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

⁷For a perceptive evaluation of Luther the scholar, see E. Harris Harbison, *The Christian Scholar in the Age of the Reformation* (New York: Scribner's, 1956), 103-35.

some time, but it appears as if their findings have not filtered through to us literary scholars, seemingly happy to perpetrate old and outworn assumptions.

I

Like the humanist return *ad fontes*, the Protestant reformers saw their undertaking as a retrieval of the sources of Christianity: first and foremost the scriptures themselves, but secondarily the early Church Fathers. Of these Saint Augustine played the leading role in lending legitimacy and support to the views of both Luther and Calvin. For Luther this debt is felt in his crucial distinction, with its obvious overtones of *De civitate Dei*, between the "Kingdom of Earth (*regnum mundi*)" and the "Kingdom of Christ (*regnum Christi*)."⁸ The Earthly Kingdom is not autonomous but serves under the Kingdom of Christ and has clearly defined limits. Yet within its boundaries, Luther allows a definite space to human reason. He gives his most emphatic tribute in the 1536 *Disputation Concerning Man*:

4. And it is certainly true that reason is the most important and the highest in rank among all things and, in comparison with other things of this life, the best and something divine. 5. It is the inventor and mentor of all the arts, medicines, laws, and of whatever wisdom, power, virtue, and glory men possess in this life. . . . 8. . . . It is a sun and a kind of god [*sol et numen*] appointed to administer these things in this life. 9. Nor did God after the fall of Adam take away this majesty of reason, but rather confirmed it.⁹

Only when reason encroaches on the domain of Christ does Luther use his gift for vituperation. Reason becomes "the devil's whore" when it usurps the place of faith in God's "Word" (for Luther representing both Christ and the scriptures).

Yet even in Christ's Kingdom there is a limited place for reason, as faith's handmaiden, after it has been illuminated by the Spirit.¹⁰ Luther stressed that a humanist program was a prerequisite, both historically and individually, for the right understanding of the Scriptures:

⁸See B. A. Gerrish, *Grace and Reason: A Study in the Theology of Luther* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), p. 119. Augustine, in Book 19 of *De civitate Dei*, succinctly indicates both the use and the limitations of the human Kingdom: "Thus, the heavenly City, so long as it is wayfaring on earth, not only makes use of earthly peace but fosters and actively pursues along with other human beings a common platform in regard to all that concerns our purely human life and does not interfere with faith and worship"; see *The City of God*, ed. Vernon J. Bourke (Garden City: Image-Doubleday, 1958), 456.

⁹*The Disputation Concerning Man*, as translated in Lewis W. Spitz, *The Religious Renaissance of the German Humanists* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963), 247.

¹⁰Gerrish, *Grace and Reason*, 81-83.

I am persuaded that, without a skilled training in literary studies, no true theology can establish and maintain itself, seeing that in times past it has invariably fallen miserably and lain prostrate with the decline of learning. On the other hand, it is indubitable that there has never been a signal revelation of divine truth unless first the way has been prepared for it, as by a John the Baptist, by the revival and pursuit of the study of languages and literature [*surgentibus et florentibus linguis et literis*]. Assuredly there is nothing I should less wish to happen than that our youth should neglect poetry and rhetoric. . . . We have been German brutes far too long. Let us for once use our reason so that God notices our thankfulness for his good gifts. . . .¹¹

Consequently, Luther not only tolerated but prescribed the humanist curriculum, which was virtually identical with the acceptable sphere for human reason, as indeed the name *studia humanitatis* indicated. He promoted the University of Wittenberg, and he brought in Melanchthon, one of the foremost scholars of his generation, to boost its prestige.¹² Indeed, the religious reformation of northern Europe—Lutheran, Calvinist, Zwinglian, and Anglican alike—went hand in hand with a strengthening of the educational system, from the foundation of preparatory schools to the rejuvenation or foundation of universities and colleges.¹³ To consolidate Protestantism a *learned* clergy was needed. Before the prospective theologian or minister was allowed to enter his final vocation, he therefore received a thorough and time-consuming grounding in the more mundane business of grammar, rhetoric, and logic. Theology, the queen of the university faculties, and the only one with the Kingdom of Christ as her rightful domain, depended upon the skills of the Earthly Kingdom.

II

Even if Luther was the fountainhead of the Reformation, it was Calvin, in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, who systematized the new doc-

¹¹Letter to Eobanus Hessus written on March 29, 1523, as translated in Spitz, *Religious Renaissance*, 243. The Latin original can be found in *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe: Briefwechsel*, vol. 3 (Weimar: Böhlau, 1933), 49–50.

¹²Melanchthon's position on human reason, which was in close agreement with that of Luther, has been studied by Quirinus Breen, *Christianity and Humanism: Studies in the History of Ideas*, ed. Nelson Peter Ross (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 69–85.

¹³One of the "outstanding features of Protestant education" was "the promotion of the *humaniora* on various levels of education," stresses Lewis Spitz, "Further Lines of Inquiry for the Study of 'Reformation and Pedagogy,'" *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion*, ed. Charles Trinkaus and Heiko A. Oberman (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 303. For Luther's influence on the educational system, see Spitz, *Religious Renaissance*, 245–46. On the Calvinist educational policies, see Menna Prestwich, ed., *International Calvinism 1541–1715* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 4–5, 63, 151.

trines. And it was in contact with Calvinism (and Zwinglianism) that the Elizabethan puritans consolidated the Reformation. On the question we are dealing with here, however, one should not overemphasize the differences between the Lutheran and the Calvinist standpoint. We shall find that Calvin's views on reason, not unexpectedly, show substantial concord with those of Luther. Also Calvin cherished and repeatedly cited Saint Augustine, "with whom he felt a deep affinity."¹⁴ Calvin, with less hesitation than Luther, can be termed a humanist. As William Bouwsma has recently stressed, "Calvin inhabited the Erasmian world of thought and breathed its spiritual atmosphere; he remained in major ways always a humanist of the late Renaissance."¹⁵

In Book II of the *Institutes* Calvin begins his discussion of human reason with a presentation of the classical, pre-Christian view: "This therfore is the summe of the opinion of al the Philosophers, that the reason of mans vnderstandinge is suffycyente for ryghte gouernaunce" (II.ii.3).¹⁶ Against this assessment the reformer sets a grimmer view: "The common sayinge whyche thei [i.e., the schoolmen] haue borrowed oute of Augustine pleaseth mee well, that the naturall gyftes were corrupted in manne by synne, and of the supernaturall hee was made emptye" (II.ii.12). But he immediately introduces a distinction: some gifts are completely extinguished by the Fall, others only corrupted. To the first category belong those of the Kingdom of God. In the human sphere, the situation is somewhat different. In man's nature, Calvin concedes, "there shyne yet some sparkes that shewe that hee ys a creature hauinge reason, and that hee differeth from brute beastes, bicause he is endued with vnderstanding." He then makes explicit Luther's (and Augustine's) distinction between the two Kingdoms:

Lette thys therefore bee the distinction, that there is one vnderstandynge of earthely thynges, an other of heauenly thynges. Earthly thynges I call those that doe not concerne God and his Kyngdome, true ryghteousnesse, and the blessednesse of eternall lyfe, but haue all theyr respecte and relation to thys presente lyfe, and are as yt were containeth wythin the boundes thereof. Heauenly thinges, I cal the pure knowledge of God, the ordre of true righteousnesse and the misteries of the heauenly kyngdome. Of the fyrste sorte are policy, gouernaunce of householde, all handy craftes, and liberall Sciences. Of the seconde sorte are the knowl-

¹⁴Richard Stauffer, "Calvin," in Prestwich, *International Calvinism*, 29.

¹⁵William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth-Century Portrait* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 13. Bouwsma touches upon many of the issues of this paper, see esp. 79–80, 113–27, 142–43, 153–61.

¹⁶John Calvin, *The Instituton of Christian Religion*, trans. Thomas Norton (London, 1561). References to this edition will be given in the text by book, chapter, and section.

edge of God and Gods will, and the rule to frame oure lyfe accordynge to yt. (II.ii.13)

"In the orderynge of thys lyfe," he concludes, "no manne ys voyde of the lyghte of reason." As with Luther, within the human sphere—again constituted by the humanist curriculum—reason, however frail, is not to be discounted. What follows are words of appreciation we may not have expected from the reformer:

So oft therefore as we lyghte vpon profane wryters, lette vs be putte in mynde by that maruaylous lyghte of trueth that shyneth in them, that the wytte of manne, howe muche soeuer yt bee peruerterd and fallen from the fyrste integryte, ys yet styll clothed and garnyshed wyth excellent gyftes of God. If wee concyde that the spyryte of God ys the onely fountayne of trueth, *wee wyll neyther refuse nor despise the trueth yt selfe, wheresoeuer yt shall appeare, excepte wee wyl dishonourably vse the spyryte of God.* (II.ii.15; italics added)¹⁷

By a wonderful sleight of hand, Calvin is able to raise human dignity and capability. We may be totally depraved, but by a "generall grace" (II.ii.17) available to all men, God empowers us to function adequately within the human Kingdom. The Holy Spirit, even in pre-Christian times, had illuminated the human understanding and enabled the pagans to produce writings of enduring value. Calvin here reveals his humanist and Erasmian sympathies. "Everything in the pagan world," Erasmus had written in the *Antibarbari*, "that was valiantly done, brilliantly said, ingeniously thought, diligently transmitted, had been prepared by Christ for his society."¹⁸

God's general illumination thereby provides Calvin with a platform for his reformed academies, whose curriculum was based on the Classics:

Shall wee saye that thei had no wytte, whiche by settinge in ordre the arte of speache [*arte disserendi*], haue taught vs to speake wyth reason? Shal we saye that they were madde, whiche in settinge fourthe Physycke, haue employed theyr dilygence for vs? What of all the Mathematicall sciences? shall wee thynke them the dotynge erroures of madde menne? no, rather wee canne not readde the

¹⁷As so often, Calvin is here echoing Augustine: "Let every good and true Christian understand that wherever truth may be found, it belongs to his Master"; see *On Christian Doctrine* 2.18, tr. J. F. Shaw, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, first series, vol. 2 (rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 545.

¹⁸As quoted in Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle, *Christening Pagan Mysteries: Erasmus in Pursuit of Wisdom* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 85. Erasmus, according to Boyle, thought that "human nature is animated by the presence of the Logos (i.e. Christ), who gives every impetus to virtue, by his common grace 'which is not called grace, although it is.'" For Erasmus' influence on Calvin, see Bouwsma, *Calvin: Portrait*, esp. 3, 13–14.

wrytynges of the oulde menne [i.e., the ancients], concernyng these thynges, wythoute great admiration of theyr wytte. . . . If it haue ben the Lordes will that we shoulde be holpen by the trauaile and seruice of the wicked in naturall Phylosophie, Dialectike, the mathematicall knoweledges, and others: lette vs vse it. (II.ii.15-16)

From Geneva to Harvard College and beyond, the Reformed Church, spurred by Calvin, consequently worked for the establishment of centers of learning. Sidney, with his active interest in these schools, is a good example of the attitudes of the Protestant intelligentsia. In addition to an early training under the puritan schoolmaster Thomas Ashton and his years at Oxford, he spent several months of his Grand Tour at Johann Sturm's famous Strasbourg Academy,¹⁹ and while serving in the Low Countries, he kept close contact with the University of Leiden, founded in 1574.²⁰

Calvin wavered as to which sphere to delegate one important area of the humanist study: ethics. The traditional view was that moral philosophy, in Sidney's words, "extendeth itself out of the limits of a man's own little world to the government of families and maintaining of public societies" (*Defence* 83). Calvin unequivocally placed government and household management within the earthly sphere, but he seemed to relegate personal ethics of God's Kingdom, thereby putting it out of bounds for the fallen intellect. His reason was that the moral law, in the form of the Decalogue, belonged to the scriptures. But he made a further distinction, shared with Luther, between the two tablets of the Mosaic law. The first tablet covers man's relation with God. Only the special illumination of the Spirit can enlighten man about these issues. Calvin, however, expresses a more qualified view about the second tablet, which prescribes man's relation to man:

Truely [reason] atteineth not at all to those that are the chiefe things in the First table, . . . In the commaundementes of the Second table it hath some more vnderstandyng, by so much as they came nerer to the preseruacion of ciuile felowshyppe among menne. (II.ii.24)

With the first tablet, God's Word is our only guide, but with the second a certain space is allotted to human reason, and a door is thereby opened to the study of the writers of antiquity. Their views had to be complemented and corrected by the scriptures, but they were not shut out.

Calvin's overriding concern, of course, is man's eternal salvation, and here man has need of outside help. The reformer falls back on an Augustinian concept, divine illumination: "And Augustine so farre acknoweleged

¹⁹John Buxton, *Sir Philip Sidney and the English Renaissance* (London: Macmillan, 1954), 59.

²⁰See Jan van Dorsten, *Poets, Patrons, and Professors* (Leiden: Brill, 1962).

this default of reson to vnderstande those thinges that are of God, that he thinketh the grace of illumination to be no lesse necessarie for our mindes, than the light of the sunne is for our eyes" (II.ii.25). The Holy Spirit must become "an inwarde teacher, by whose workynge the promyse of saluation pearceth into oure mindes" (III.i.4). This special saving illumination of the Spirit, however, should not be confused with the general illumination which all men benefit from, and which formed the epistemological foundation for the communicative model of the Renaissance.²¹ Both are a free gift of God. "who giveth us hands to write and wits to conceive" (*Defence* 116), but the former is granted only to the elect, those who have had "the eyes of the mind . . . cleared by faith" (*Defence* 77), while the latter can be depended upon in day-to-day affairs by all men.

III

In recent critical assessment of Sidney's works one can discern two schools: the majority view has been to trace Sidney's dependence on the humanist background,²² while a minority, perhaps best represented by Andrew Weiner, has stressed the Calvinist heritage.²³ With some oversimplification, one may say that the first group has emphasized the heroic and the ideal in Sidney's oeuvre, while the second has dwelt on the ironic and the flawed. Some kind of synthesis has been attempted by G. F. Waller, who perceives in Sidney a "strange and fruitful tension" between the conflicting claims of Calvin and Giordano Bruno,²⁴ and by Sinfield, who situates the not so fruitful tension at the intersection between (secular) humanism and Protestantism.

I would like to propose a different synthesis from the ones advocated by Waller and Sinfield. Sidney, I submit, was in agreement with Luther and Calvin on the distinction between the two Kingdoms. The humanist program, including the making of poetry, was to be carried out within the human sphere, while the Heavenly Kingdom was to be left to the theologians. One of Sidney's reasons for writing the *Arcadia* was precisely to warn against the dangers accompanying the trespass over that boundary line. But within the wide area included under "earthly things" Sidney

²¹See chapter 1 of my *The "Enabling of Judgement."*

²²The complete list of this group would almost amount to a full Sidney bibliography, but Walter R. Davis, *Sidney's Arcadia. A Map of Arcadia: Sidney's Romance in Its Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965) may serve as an example.

²³In addition to Andrew Weiner, *Sir Philip Sidney and the Poetics of Protestantism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1978), one can include in this group Franco Marengo, "Double Plot in Sidney's Old Arcadia," *Modern Language Review* 64 (1969): 248-63, and Sinfield, *Literature in Protestant England 1560-1660*. All three scholars have additional Sidney studies to their credit.

²⁴G.F. Waller, "'This Matching of Contraries': Bruno, Calvin and the Sidney Circle," *Neophilologus* 56 (1972): 334.

rightly felt a strong backing from the reformers as he sought to develop the human potential to its limit: "to as high a perfection as our degenerate souls, made worse by their clayey lodgings, can be capable of" (*Defence* 82).

We find Sidney instructing his friend Edward Denny about the distinction between the two Kingdoms, and in terms that closely echo those found in the *Institutes*. In a letter written to give advice on a program of studies, Sidney begins by suggesting books on ethics that will further Denny's personal development:

The knowledge of our selves no doubt ought to be most pretious vnto vs; and therein the holy scriptures, if not the only, are certainly the incomperable lanterne in this fleshly darkness of ours: For (alas) what is all knowledge? if in the end of this litle and weerisome pilgrimage, Hell become our schoolmaster. They therefore are diligently, to be redd. To them if you will adde as to the helpe of the second table (I meane that which contaynes the love of thy neighbour, & dealing betwixt man & man) some parts of morall philosophy, I thinke you shall doe very wisely. . . . And therof are many bookes written; but to my pleasing Aristotles Ethickes passe; but he is somethinge darke and hath need of a Logicall examination, Tullyes offices next if not equall, & truly for you & my selfe beyond any. With him you may ioyn some of Plutarcks discourses, . . . But let Tully be for that mater your foundation, next to the foundation of foundations, and wisdome of wisdomes, I meane the holy scripture.²⁵

Sidney follows Calvin closely when he dichotomizes "the knowledge of our selves" into the two tablets of the Mosaic law. The first tablet, concerning the Heavenly Kingdom, has only one source of study, the Bible. For the second tablet, dealing with man's relationship to man, one can draw additional benefit from classical writings on moral philosophy, but even then in tandem with the moral teaching of the scriptures. Human knowledge (and by implication human reason) is never autonomous. "What is all knowledge," Sidney pointedly counsels, if "Hell become our schoolmaster." Yet reason has its place, and when he proceeds to suggest readings for Denny's professional development, he remains squarely within the Earthly Kingdom, offering a mixture of modern and classical books on history and soldiery to strengthen "both the iudgement, & memory."

The same careful delimitation runs through the *Defence of Poesie*. The *Defence* is a work in the humanist tradition, rhetorical rather than logical, and more than one loose end can be found dangling. But this does not mean it is quite as open to the charge of contradiction and indeterminacy as

²⁵As cited in James M. Osborn, *Young Philip Sidney, 1572-1577* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 538-39.

Ronald Levao, with his alignment of Sidney with Nicholas of Cusa, would have it.²⁶ When Sidney distinguishes between three kinds of poetry (divine, philosophical, and "right" poetry) it is more than a "debatable argument." For divine poetry he has the highest regard, giving the palm to the Psalms of David, "a heavenly poesy, wherein almost he [i.e., David most of all] showeth himself a passionate lover of that unspeakable and everlasting beauty *to be seen by the eyes of the mind, only cleared by faith*" (77; emphasis added). The emphasized phrase, referring to the Augustinian special illumination, is crucial. Only in connection with "the poetical part of scripture" does Sidney allow himself such florid language, and even then hedged in by Protestant terminology. Calvin had similarly used heightened language as he described the contemplation of the "heavenly mysteries" made possible by the Spirit:

For the soule enlightned by [the Spirit of God], taketh as it wer a new sharpnes of vnderstanding, wherwith it maye beholde heauenly misteries, with brightnes wherof it was before daseled in it selfe. And so mans vnderstanding receiuing brightnesse by the lighte of the holy ghost, doth neuer till then truely beginne to taste of those thinges that belong to the kingdome of God. (*Institutes* III.ii.34)

Although Sidney refers in passing to the pagan counterpart of this divine poesy, he is careful to separate the two. Pagan poetry, "*did seem to have some divine force in it*" (*Defence* 77; my emphasis), but in the final analysis, Plato's view that poetry is "a very inspiring of a divine force, far above man's wit," Sidney maintains, "attributeth unto poesy more than myself do" (109). Sidney consequently has no place for the Platonic frenzy celebrated by the Florentine platonists and by Giordano Bruno, since this would blur the distinction between the two Kingdoms.

Philosophical poetry gets a cursory mention before Sidney turns to the main concern of his *Defence*, the "right poets," who feign "notable images of virtues, vices, or what else, with that delightful teaching, which must be the right describing note to know a poet by" (80–82). In comparison with the claims put forth by Ficino or Bruno, Sidney's combination of didacticism and ethics may not appear a very high calling for the poet. Instead of the divine frenzies he promotes a more earthbound goal: "the ending end of all earthly learning being virtuous action, those skills that most serve to bring forth that have a most just title to be princes over all the rest" (83; my emphasis). In the main body of the treatise, Sidney investigates these earthly skills, which turn out to be cornerstones of the humanist curriculum: moral philosophy and history, and mediating between the two, poetry, which "coupleth the general notion" of the one "with the particular

²⁶Ronald Levao, "Sidney's Feigned *Apology*," *PMLA* 94 (1979):223–33.

example" of the other (85). But he is careful not to encroach upon the Heavenly Kingdom:

Therefore compare we the poet with the historian and with the moral philosopher; and if he go beyond them both, no other human skill can match him. For as for the divine, with all reverence it is ever to be excepted, not only for having his scope as far beyond any of these as eternity exceedeth a moment, but even for passing each of these in themselves. (84)

The demarcations of the Augustinian position could not have been expressed more clearly. Right poetry remains a human skill without aspirations to divinity.

The right poet therefore confines himself to the humanist aim of strengthening the intellect:

This purifying of wit—this enriching of memory, enabling of judgement, and enlarging of conceit—which commonly we call learning, under what name soever it come forth, or to what immediate end soever it be directed, the final end is to lead and draw us to as high a perfection as our degenerate souls, made worse by their clayey lodgings, can be capable of" (82).

The citation reveals Sidney's awareness of the impediments. While human reason, "our erected wit," may show us what perfection is, "our infected will," because of Adam's "accursed fall," keeps us from attaining it (79). And more vitiating, our reason, a faculty within the "degenerate" soul, is infected too. But precisely *because* of the shortcomings of reason, Sidney makes the "purifying of wit" (82) or the "strengthening [of] man's wit" (109) central to his poetics. The poet's task may be limited to the human Kingdom but is of utmost importance within this realm.

The *Defence of Poesie* was composed while Sidney was busy writing and revising his most ambitious literary work, the *Arcadia*. Nothing in the *Arcadia*, including the discussion between Pamela and Cecropia in the revised third book, goes outside the domain of the Earthly Kingdom. Melanchthon had enumerated what areas he thought belonged to the humanist sphere, and the topics touched upon in the *Arcadia* all lay within his boundary:

All the good arts are gifts of God, but they must severally keep their own place. That is, true philosophy does not lack reason and proof, (it) is a certain knowledge of divine law, it knows that God is, and that he judges about civil mores; it perceives that the difference between the honorable and disgraceful is divinely immanent in us, it judges that wicked atrocities are punished by God;

it even has a certain presage concerning immortality. But it does not see or teach what is characteristic of the gospel, i.e. remission of sins, freely given by the Son of God.²⁷

To stress the secular nature of the work, Sidney conspicuously places the action among pagans in pre-Christian times. Recent critics have characterized the revised *Arcadia* in terms of the attainment of virtue through a neoplatonic quest for beauty.²⁸ This, however, would be the very opposite of Sidney's own aim. The princes' love affair is pointedly present to show the impossibility of such a quest. Pyrocles and Musidorus may believe they can reach beatitude through their own efforts or in accordance with some idealistic theory, but Sidney, as I have shown at length elsewhere, quickly deflates any Pelagian pretence.²⁹

Sidney's topical interests in the *Arcadia* are political theory and moral philosophy, and he is as much concerned to describe the difficulties as the achievements involved in reaching moral virtue. Yet his primary interest is to develop God's gift of reason. The readers of the old *Arcadia* (and of the 1593 composite version) emulate Euarchus by presiding over the final trial, purifying their wits by judging the actions and words of the protagonists and by making valid inferences. But as in the *Defence*, Sidney at the same time makes his readers fully aware of the limitations of human reason. As Euarchus himself reminds the Arcadians: "Remember I am a man; that is to say, a creature whose reason is often darkened with error."³⁰ Again, we must not forget that the Earthly Kingdom, even though distinct from the Kingdom of God, is not autonomous but depends upon the latter. The equity of a benign Providence may therefore overturn Euarchus's verdicts by resurrecting Basilius. Yet this does not mean that we, any more than Euarchus, should turn over our human responsibility. Fulke Greville, Sidney's biographer, expresses his friend's attitude to reason with the same paradox:

. . . after mature deliberation being once resolved, [Sidney] never brought any questions of change to afflict himself with, or perplex the business; but left the success to his will, that governs the blinde

²⁷*Declamatio de Platone*, as cited in Breen, *Christianity and Humanism*, 82–83.

²⁸Davis, *Map of Arcadia*, set the tone, and his theses have influenced a number of studies; see, for example, Jon S. Lawry, *Sidney's Two "Arcadias": Pattern and Proceeding* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), 187, 220; Thelma N. Greenfield, *The Eye of Judgment: Reading the "New Arcadia"* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1982), 78; Nancy Lindheim, *The Structures of Sidney's "Arcadia"* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 143; William Craft, "The Shaping Picture of Love in Sidney's *New Arcadia*," *Studies in Philology* 81 (1984):403.

²⁹Åke Bergvall, "The 'Enabling of Judgement': An Old Reading of the *New Arcadia*," *Studies in Philology*, 85 (1988), 471–88.

³⁰*The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia* (The old *Arcadia*), ed. Jean Robertson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 365.

prosperities, and unprosperities of Chance; and so works out his own ends by the erring frailties of humane reason and affection.³¹

God may override “the erring frailties of humane reason” but that does not preempt “mature deliberation.” Greville indeed had just asserted that the aim of his *Life* was “to shew the clearness, and readiness of this Gentlemans judgement, in all degrees, and offices of life.” The right use of reason does not lead to heaven but it does maximize the human potential.

John Milton, another committed Protestant poet and humanist, was to brand the *Arcadia* as a “vain amatorious poem,” yet his gripes were caused by its use within the Heavenly Kingdom. Charles I had cited Pamela’s prayer before his execution:

a prayer stol’n word for word from the mouth of a heathen fiction praying to a heathen God, & that in no serious book, but the vain amatorious poem of S^r Philip Sidney’s *Arcadia*; a book in that kind full of worth and wit, but among religious thoughts and duties not worthy to be nam’d; nor to be read at any time without good caution, much less in time of trouble and affliction to be a Christian prayer-book.³²

Milton is peeved not by the work as such but by the king’s use of it. Like its author, he saw its rightful realm: not a religious work but “in that kind” not to be despised. Better than most modern critics he perceived the value of its love story: vain and amatorious, not to be read without good caution, yet full of worth and wit.

³¹Fulke Greville, *The Life of the Renowned Sir Philip Sidney* (London, 1652), 33.

³²*The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, ed. D. M. Wolfe et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953–82), 3:362–63.