“‘To serve your prince by . . . an honest dissimulation’: The New Arcadia as a Defense of Poetry

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Although Philip Sidney’s letter to his sister prefacing the Old Arcadia registers anxiety about promiscuous dissemination, asking her to limit its circulation to “friends who will weigh errors in the balance of goodwill,” he clearly becomes more open to diverse audiences when he revises his great romance (3).1 In the letter, Sidney distinguishes between forgiving “friends” and the “severer eyes” to whom he does not wish to expose his work, but in his Defence of Poetry (which he probably wrote as he was finishing the Old Arcadia or shortly after completing it) he implicitly identifies a different pair of alternative audiences based not on their relationship to him but on their relationship to “poetry”—those who actively engage a text and “use the narration but as an imaginative ground-plot of a profitable invention” (DP 103), and those who are seduced by the pleasures of the text “ere themselves be aware, as if they took a medicine of cherries” (DP 93).2 It is this shift in Sidney’s attitude toward his audiences that has special pertinence for reading the New Arcadia.

There is no convincing evidence of Sidney’s deliberate circulation of the manuscript of the Defence and therefore no way to identify the actual contemporary audience, but there are clear indications that the properly participatory audience described in it is made up of Sidney’s peers at court. The only time Sidney uses direct second-person address in a form other than the generic “you, the reader” occurs when he proposes a hypothetical situation—“if occasion be presented unto you to serve your prince” (DP 89)—which would have been applicable

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primarily if not exclusively to courtiers and statesmen. The readers who have to be seduced “to take that goodness in hand, which without delight they would fly as from a stranger” (DP 81), on the other hand, are the general, non-elite populace who need to be instructed “ere themselves be aware” (DP 93) that they are being instructed.

There is a third audience identified in the Defence, however, one that can be either creatively participatory or frustratingly recalcitrant but cannot be ignored by the “right poet”—the prince. When Sidney claims that the poet can “bestow a Cyrus on the world to make many Cyruses, if they will learn aright why and how that maker made him” (DP 79), the relative pronoun “they” necessarily refers to “Cyruses,” an identity available only to princes (as Sidney makes clear when he later identifies Xenophon’s “feigned Cyrus” as “counsel” that can “readily direct a prince” [DP 86]). Sidney then is primarily interested in poetry that both advises princes and educates (or indoctrinates) the masses, a conclusion that is further confirmed by his choice of the two instances of poetic “service” he cites: the prophet Nathan’s parable to the erring King David and Menenius Agrrippa’s oration to the rebellious people of Rome (DP 93–94).

While the “stony and beastly people” (DP 74) are readily seduced by the delights of poetry, however, the Defence repeatedly acknowledges that princes can be peculiarly resistant to the services of poetry—the “abominable tyrant Alexander Pheraeus . . . withdrew himself from hearkening to that which might mollify his hardened heart” (DP 96–97), and even Queen Elizabeth, figured metonymically as “England, the mother of excellent minds,” has “grown so hard a stepmother to poets” (DP 110). And it is because of this that Sidney’s other audience of fellow courtiers becomes central to the agenda of the Defence. Although the Defence recognizes the importance of both prince and people as audiences of poetry, it is the young courtiers who are constructed as the actual readership of Sidney’s essay, from the opening anecdote about horsemanship to the final curse on lovers who lack “skill of a sonnet” (DP 121).

Whether Sidney ever actually shared his manuscript with friends and colleagues at court, his choice of a forensic oration as the stylistic model for his argument suggests that he was not simply engaging in private meditation but was attempting to construct a persuasive public argument. The question that has never adequately been answered