

**‘The right reward of an evil-tongued schelm:’  
The Rhapsodic Weaving of Oral Rhetoric and  
Residue and the Printed Word in Sir Philip Sidney’s  
*Defence of Leicester***

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This paper traces how, despite the frequent criticism it receives as a less skillfully written text from his repertoire, a careful reading of Sir Philip Sidney’s *Defence of Leicester* might help to shed light on the richness of the *Defence*, and the way in which it participates in and is representative of the linguistic world of 16th-century England, a world still experiencing the growth of print, yet also closely related to oral and chirographic language. This article shows how Sidney’s text culls, both consciously and unconsciously, from the world of oral memory and rhetoric, as well as from the world of print and visual media to speak to his audience, to defend his uncle’s (and his own) lineage, and to attack those who had attempted to destroy the name of the Earl of Leicester.

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The most recent editors of the text have argued that “(t)hough Sidney’s latest piece of writing, few would regard the *Defence of Leicester* as his most mature” (Duncan-Jones & van Dorsten, 1973a, p.124). Sidney’s *Defence of Leicester*, less famous than his other “Defense” (*A Defence of Poetry*), has been met with similar criticism from most readers, who regard it as less than the best work on the part of Sidney. Berry (1998), though, does suggest that the *Defence of Leicester* “provides an instructive parallel to *A Defence of Poetry*,” arguing that

Sidney defended poetry as someone who had “slipped” into the title of a poet. Upon the death of Leicester’s young son on 19 July 1584, Sidney had once again slipped into the title of heir to the great earl. In both cases the defence of another subject or person is to a great extent a self-defence, and in both cases the self-interest is apparent. (p. 150)

He terms the *Defence of Leicester*, “a brief and relatively unsuccessful work” (p. 150). Mazzola (2003) sees it as forming, with *A Defence of Poetry*, “bookends demarcating public triumphs and private pains” (p. 22), but, unlike his other works, *Defence of Leicester* “contains none of Sidney’s masterful wit or irony, only sarcasm and self-regard and the petulance of someone who knows he’s being looked at, buttressed, he claims, by the assurance of a ‘nobility never interrupted’” (p. 25). Hill (1975) expressed similar sentiments, surprised by the text’s “uncharacteristic lack of poise and in its inadequacy as an answer to the anonymous libeler of his uncle” (p. 391). In her biography of Sidney, Duncan-Jones (1991) suggested that the *Defence* “showed Sidney at his arrogant worst” (p. 272), and “seems to have been a complete

failure, for it was not in fact published, and there are no allusions to it among Sidney's circle of friends and correspondents" (p. 267). Indeed, Duncan-Jones noted, the text was "met with a resounding silence"—indeed, this notion of a silent response figures greatly into the interwoven oral and textual world in which Sidney was working, the world which is reflected quite accurately in this under-appreciated work.

The occasion of Sidney's composition of the *Defence of Leicester* seems to have been upon his reading of *The Copy of a Letter written by a Master of Art of Cambridge to his friend in London . . . about the present state, and some proceedings of the Earl of Leicester and his friends in London*, published in 1584, and later known as *Leicester's Commonwealth*, perhaps when it arrived in England in the summer of 1584 (Duncan-Jones & van Dorsten, 1973a, p. 123). The authorship of this text is not certainly known, but Duncan-Jones and van Dorsten (1973a), discuss possibilities, as well as the probable suggestion that the text was written by Thomas Morgan, with the help of Lord Paget, Charles Arundel, and Sir Thomas Tresham, "all of whom were Catholic exiles in France, and ex-courtiers" (p. 126). The Earl of Leicester, attacked in this text, was Sidney's uncle, and, since the death of the Earl's son, Sidney had become heir to the Earl. *Leicester's Commonwealth*, which Duncan-Jones called "eloquently persuasive" (1991, p. 260) and "compulsive reading" (p. 266), saddled "Leicester with all kinds of charges (many already familiar to its readers) including Leicester's involvement in his first wife's death and his ambition to marry Elizabeth and/or remove the queen from power" (Mazzola, 2003, pp. 24-25). It was "(o)rganized as a dialogue between a scholar, a gentleman, and a lawyer . . . is full of scurrilous innuendo, circumstantial evidence, and hearsay, but is admirably muted in tone, rarely rising to the level of invective found in some parts of Sidney's retort" (Kelleher, 1977, p. 154). Sidney's *Defence* is a response to this piece, an "attempt to defend his uncle's reputation . . . in a hastily written pamphlet" (Peck, 1985, p. 8), a rush exhibited "both from the state of his drafts, which survive, and from the rather hectic array of often half-completed thoughts in the argument itself" (p. 249). Sidney may have "set to work at high speed" (Duncan-Jones, 1991, p. 267) in responding to *Leicester's Commonwealth* because,

(a)s an all-out attack on one of Elizabeth's chief advisers, it was also, implicitly, an attack on Elizabeth herself for her poor judgment in favoring this corrupt and self-serving individual. Its stress on the succession question was deliberately subversive. In the current atmosphere of plotting and feared invasion such a work could not be allowed to stand. (p. 267)

Duncan-Jones (1991) suggested his response may have been prompted by the "Queen and Council" who "after deciding that Sidney's *Defence of Leicester* was not the answer that Elizabeth decided to issue her remarkably severe Proclamation against persons found distributing or possessing the *Commonwealth*, on 12 October 1584," a proclamation that may have been the reason why Sidney's text, though "alone among Sidney's writings, it was clearly intended for publication, . . . was not entered in the

Stationers' Register, and was first printed by Collins in 1746" (Duncan-Jones & van Dorsten, 1973a, p. 124). Though it is possible that Sidney did indeed compose the *Defence* at the urging of the Queen to defend her honor after its attack in the *Commonwealth*, the question of what motivated Sidney and his intentions in composing the *Defence* has not yet been resolved.

Some scholars have suggested that the *Defence* is Sidney's attempt to demonstrate his own high birth, tied to "his desire to play an active political part," which "was becoming steadily more urgent" (Duncan-Jones & van Dorsten, 1973a, p. 123). The *Defence* is "an arrogant demonstration of his uncle's nobility" and "both implicitly and explicitly . . . a demonstration of his own" (p. 124), and that Sidney was "personally stung by" (Duncan-Jones, 1991, p. 268) the *Commonwealth*, "discovering that he himself might eventually become Earl of Leicester" (p. 267). Baughan suggested that various documents of the Sidney family demonstrate that Sidney "was born into a clannish and designing family that underscored the importance of high birth and powerful family ties" (1952, p. 36), focused on their own genealogical background. Berry (1998) echoed this argument, claiming that the *Defence* shows Sidney's "extreme sensitivity to the question of titles" (p. 150). Peck suggested that, though "his own honor had been touched, he may have intended from the outset to defend his own family honor, as he may have felt required in honor to do" (1985, p. 251), that he was compelled by the codes of honor to defend his family name. Finally, Connell offered a completely different reading of Sidney's purpose in writing the *Defence*, that he objects to the *Commonwealth* on "purely literary" grounds—"that the story is patently improbable" (1977, p. 134). Despite all of these suggestions, we will probably never know Sidney's exact reasons for composing this text, but by looking at the text itself, we can perhaps shed more light on his intended goals and the relative effectiveness of the piece.

While the text appears to have been "met with a resounding silence" (Duncan-Jones, 1991, p. 267), the reasons for this reaction to the work are up for debate as well. First, the text was never published and only one manuscript copy existed in Sidney's own time (Duncan-Jones & van Dorsten, 1973a, p. 124). Possible reasons for the failed circulation of this text have already been mentioned; however, Peck raised the argument that perhaps "the government was understandably wary of opening up a public disputation on the subject of the Earl's morals" (1985, p. 9) and that "had Leicester had a chance to see Sidney's tract, he would doubtless have considered its particular strategies more harmful than helpful" (p. 249), while Connell argued that "Sidney's defence was overshadowed and was not published as he had at first intended" most likely "because official word went out from the Privy Council itself" decrying the *Commonwealth* as treasonous (1977, p. 104 n.1). Second, it has been suggested that perhaps the text is met with silence because of its overall ineffectiveness, that it "is totally inadequate as a reply to the libel," as "Sidney attempts to discredit the whole work by refuting in detail a single point thrown out almost incidentally by the libeler, that Leicester 'hath not ancient nobility'" (Duncan-Jones &

van Dorsten, 1973a, p. 124), and that it “rather obviously sidesteps the *Commonwealth*’s direct calumnies upon the Earl’s morals” (Peck, 1985, p. 9). Despite these criticisms, most scholars have granted the *Defence* some positive remarks. Peck maintained that Sidney “does a good job” of engaging a “counterattack upon libels and libelers in general” (p. 250). Mazzola (2003) suggested that “Sidney employs prose to turn the rumors about his uncle as traitor into a celebration of the Dudley family . . . (and t)hese prose reversals continually rewrite as they celebrate family history” (p. 70). Even Duncan-Jones and van Dorsten suggested that “as a piece of Tudor genealogizing (it) may be reckoned a comparative success” as “one feels that the charge of ‘want of gentry’ has been very plausibly rebutted” (1973a, p. 127), though they still maintain that “the importance of the *Defence of Leicester* is mainly historical” (p. 126). Certainly the text is indeed historically important, and by placing the text within its historical context, we can discern the richness of Sidney’s *Defence*, and the way in which it participates in and is representative of the linguistic world of 16th-century England.

Clearly Sidney does deserve some of the criticism he receives for the *Defence*; indeed, occasionally his vituperative repertoire resorts to simple sarcasm in his response to the author of the *Commonwealth*. For example, he thanks that author for the opportunity to write out his genealogy for all to see, noting “[I] truly am glad to have cause to set forth the nobility of that blood whereof I am descended, which, but upon so just cause, without vainglory could not have been uttered” (Duncan-Jones & van Dorsten, 1973b, p. 134), a verbal sneer aimed at his intended audience. He later thanks the author again for his opportunity to write down all he has: “So as where is this inheritance of land, and monuments in churches, and the persons themselves little more than in man’s memory, truly this libeler deserves many thanks, that with his impudent falsehood hath given occasion to set down so manifest a truth” (p. 139). Sidney’s sarcasm is even clearer when he writes, “What should be said but that this fellow desires to be known suitable: having an untrue heart, he will become it with an untrue tongue” (p. 137), suggesting that the author is only speaking such falsehoods so as to allow his words to match his false heart. Finally, in a last back-handed remark, he suggests that he is sure the author will come to read his *Defence* and know of Sidney’s response, he who apparently (at least according to the claims made in the *Commonwealth*), “knows the very whisperings of the privy chamber” (p. 141). This occasional sarcasm, though, does not detract from what the text reveals about 16th-century prose.

Sidney’s work is caught up in a world still experiencing the growth of print, yet demonstrates its close relationship with the oral and chirographic worlds of much of early modern England. He is writing within a tradition that consciously and unconsciously makes use of the oral for purposes of communication. Indeed, Ong (1971) argued that Tudor prose contained a great deal of “oral residue:”

By oral residue I mean habits of thought and expression tracing back to preliterate situations or practice, or deriving from the dominance of the oral as a medium in a

given culture, or indicating a reluctance or inability to dissociate the written medium from the spoken. Such residue is not especially contrived and seldom conscious at all. (pp. 25-26)

Sidney's text is laden with such orally residual elements, as well as what Ong termed "consciously cultivated oral effects" (p. 25); Sidney sees himself very much as engaging in a dialogue with the anonymous author of the *Commonwealth*, a conversation that, to Sidney, is oral, written, and printed in nature—that is, very much a Tudor conversation on which Ong's scholarship sheds much light. Sidney's *Defence* demonstrates the effect his communicative milieu has on his writing: it is affected by his rhetorical education; it features the importance of the commonplace tradition in this rhetorical educational system; it evinces elements of unconscious oral residue; and it focuses on important oral elements, specifically genealogical memories.

Sidney's work clearly reflects his classical rhetorical background in the world of classical rhetoric, important in what Ong called the "highly rhetorical Tudor milieu" (1971, p. 25). Sidney "was a strict classicist" (Kelleher, 1977, p. 153) who had "so thoroughly assimilated an admittedly flexible tradition that he did not have to bend the rules or escape from them." His response follows "the structure of a classical defense" (p. 154), whose content "is fundamentally epideictic" (p. 198), and the "types of argumentation Sidney uses in the various stages of his *Defence* are all countenanced by the tradition" of rhetoric (p. 169; see especially the fourth chapter for a detailed discussion of how Sidney's *Defence of Leicester* fits the classic arrangement of a forensic speech). Kelleher argued that it is evident that his *Defence* follows "the precepts for forensic defensive orations. . . . [T]here is no evident indication of Sidney's manipulation of the tradition, which only serves to emphasize his mastery of it" (p. 207). Sidney also engages logical argumentation, classical *logos*, throughout his *Defence* to undermine the arguments of the *Commonwealth*. For example, he argues that Leicester's "mind hath ever been to serve only, and truly, setting aside all hopes, fears, his mistress by undoubted right Queen of England . . . most worth to be his Queen, having restored his overthrown house" (Duncan-Jones & van Dorsten, 1973a, p. 132-133); why, Sidney implies, would Leicester subvert the Queen who restored his house to greatness? Any suggestion to the contrary would appear illogical. Sidney also argues that in the *Commonwealth*, the author "extollet the great nobility of the house of Talbot" (p. 134), and yet questions the nobility of Leicester; however, Leicester's "own grandmother, whose blood he makes so base, was a Talbot." Sidney's appeals to *logos* here are compelling. Finally, he suggests that the genealogical arguments of his enemy result in Edmund Dudley appearing "not only ungentled, but fatherless" (p. 138); this, obviously, is contrary to reason, Sidney implies, and so Dudley must be the son of the noble Dudley house. Sidney's classic rhetorical training serves him well in organizing and structuring his oration, and in undermining some of the claims of the *Commonwealth*.

The same education that taught Sidney these classical rhetorical traditions would have introduced him to the idea of "*copia*, or the free flow of discourse essential for

oratory” (Ong, 1977, p. 150), the desire for an orator to speak freely, often rhapsodically weaving “commonplaces in the sense of standard brief disquisitions or purple patches.” Ong specifically discusses the example of the commonplace collections of Ravisius Textor whose work “was familiar to 16th- and early 17th-century schoolboys across western Europe” (p. 152). This commonplace tradition, part of the educational program of the Early Modern period and an important part of the development of orators, reveals itself as part of the backdrop of Sidney’s *Defence*. He refers to a tale of Aesop—which Duncan-Jones and van Dorsten have identified as “How the wolves sent their ambassadors to the sheep” (1973b, p. 210 n. 130, 8-9)—claiming that “the old tale testifieth” (p. 130), revealing a knowledge of a classical story which might have been a part of the commonplace books with which Sidney would have been trained. He provides a list of oral crimes he believes committed by the author of the *Commonwealth*, a rhapsodic copia that resembles the “piling up of epithets” described by Ong in “Typographic Rhapsody” (1977, p. 183): “Dissimulation, hypocrisy, adultery, falsehood, treachery, poison, rebellion, treason, cowardice, atheism and what not” (Duncan-Jones & van Dorsten, 1973b, p. 131). He notes that his enemy makes use of “Machiavel’s axioms,” (p. 132) aware of the use of proverbs and sayings engaged by the *Commonwealth* author, and responds with a discussion of the “old lessons and examples” (p. 133) about treason and traitors, including the example of Matuis’s answer to Tully, no doubt a classical example derived from Sidney’s 16th-century education. He similarly uses a proverb—that according to Duncan-Jones and van Dorsten is “no doubt a reference ultimately to the tag from Horace” (p. 211)—“as in sick folk that think with change of places to ease their evil, which indeed is inward” (p. 133). Finally, in a flourish of *copia*, Sidney sums up the epithets laid upon Leicester by the *Commonwealth*—including, for example, “The same man in the beginning of the book was so potent, to use his term, that the Queen had cause to fear him; the same man in the end thereof, so abject as any man might tread on him” (p. 140)—in what must reveal a memory filled with such lists of descriptions of men that provided the material for many a 16th-century orator.

Such oral-rhetorical elements which drive much of Sidney’s *Defence of Leicester* are more like consciously designed “oral effects”; however, the work brims over with even more unconscious elements of “oral residue,” revealing the proximity of this text to the oral world. First, Sidney refers to the *Commonwealth* as a “dialogue,” (Duncan-Jones & van Dorsten, 1973b, p. 129) a term that implies the spoken word; his counter-argument to this text is “testifying” (p. 129) to the Earl’s faith to the Queen, another term connotating spoken language. This lack of distinction between the written and spoken word lingers throughout the *Defence*: those other writers charging such people as “Gaveston, Earl of Cornwall, Robert Vere, Duke of Ireland” (p. 130) and others of inappropriate behavior are known to have done so through their “intercepted discourses” (p. 129), and the *Commonwealth* is a “railing oratory” (p. 130) and a “flood of scolding eloquence” (p. 134). Sidney also retains a respect for “naming” that would have existed in an oral culture; Ong (1982/2002) argued that “Oral peoples commonly think of names (one kind of words) as conveying power over things” (p. 33). Sidney

criticizes his enemy for naming live people, comparing him to Pace the jester, "Certainly, such a quality in a railer as I think never was heard of, to name persons alive as not only can, but do disprove his falsehoods; and yet with such familiarity to name them, without he learned it of Pace, the Duke of Norfolk's fool" (Duncan-Jones & van Dorsten, 1973b, p. 131). He refuses to take part in such naming, "loath to fail" (p. 130) by naming incorrectly as the author of the *Commonwealth* does.

Sidney also gives value to old customs, arguing that the house of Dudley is noble "to this day and thus it hath been time out of mind" (Duncan-Jones & van Dorsten, 1973b, p. 136); Fox (2000) has explained that such ancient customary knowledge might have been passed along orally, and would have been considered valid and true due to its being held as truth for so long: "If old men reported that they had known no different, that their fathers and grandfathers had never told them anything to the contrary, then this was powerful evidence towards establishing the legitimacy of a custom" (p. 279). Sidney is relying on the long-standing nature of these oral memories of the Dudley lineage, about which he claims that it is "well known" (Duncan-Jones & van Dorsten, 1973b, p. 134) and "it is to be said" (p. 134) (presumably by all people who know these facts) that the houses from which it is descended are noble. This history exists in "man's memory" (p. 139), and has been passed down orally—until, that is, "this libeler . . . hath given occasion to set down" the story in writing. Finally, Sidney reveals a familiarity with another important oral medium: news. Fox (2000) discussed the importance of orally transmitted news, often gathered "by casual contact and the questioning of travelers" (p. 342); the importance of such oral news to the people of the 16th-century manifests itself in Sidney's play on this form of communication: "So that I think it would seem as great news as if they came from the Indies, that he who by right of blood [the Earl of Leicester] . . . should be doubted to be a gentleman" (Duncan-Jones & van Dorsten, 1973b, p. 135). These forms of orality are milling around quite pervasively in the background of Sidney's *Defence*.

"Oral residue" plays out in several other ways in the *Defence*. Sidney's whole text, indeed, is partly a charge against what he considers an oral crime in the text of the *Commonwealth*, evident in the language he chooses to describe the piece, language that evokes the oral. He believes the piece to be "defaming" (Duncan-Jones & van Dorsten, 1973b, p. 129) and "railing," the work of an "impudent liar" who tries to "bark" out of envy (p. 133); that the author attempts to "backbite" (p. 130), "to slander" (p. 132), and is engaged in "lying" (p. 131) through "false invective" (p. 134) and "such a bundle of railings as if it came from the mouth of some half drunk scold in a tavern" (p. 131). Indeed, he believes that the evidence used in the *Commonwealth* were bits of overheard stories and whispers of treason (p. 131), based on gossip and rumor. Indeed, the *Commonwealth* is "a whole dictionary of slanders" (p. 133). The depiction of this piece as an oral crime is further carried out in the description of the creation of the text by Sidney, a depiction based in oral corporal images, stressing the bodily movements of spoken language, specifically the mouth, the tongue, and breath. The work comes from "a base and wretched tongue" (p. 129) of a "poisonous serpent" which does "vomit it out." It is "poison" (p. 130) served in

a “golden . . . cup” to be administered orally to the Queen. Sidney wonders who with “so stinking a breath may blow infamy” (p. 132) and charges the author, that “evil-tongued schelm” (p. 140), “liest in thy throat.” The text is dripping with unconscious “oral residue,” clearly revealing the importance of oral communication both in Sidney’s mind and in 16th-century culture more generally.

One last area in which Sidney’s work reflects the influence and importance of oral communication is in its attention to genealogy. Duncan-Jones and van Dorsten (1973a) pointed out “the widespread concern of Elizabethans to demonstrate, often by gross distortions of the evidence, that those who had most political power were also those of most ancient nobility” (p. 126)—and that Sidney’s work “may be reckoned a comparative success” in doing just this (p. 127)—as well as a more general “widespread Elizabethan interest in genealogy” (Duncan-Jones, 1991, p. 268). In *Orality and Literacy*, Ong (1982/2002) explained that such interest in genealogy goes back much further, and that these narratives of the history of a people were an important body of knowledge which were handed on orally until “the market for an oral genealogy disappears” (p. 66), at which point, “so does the genealogy itself, utterly.” This reassertion in writing of Leicester’s (and indirectly, Sidney’s) genealogy serves Sidney to ensure the viability of this knowledge, though even Sidney recognizes that it previously has been known only orally, given the opportunity to be written by the author of the *Commonwealth* (Duncan-Jones & van Dorsten, 1973b, p. 139). This gladness for the opportunity to “manifest” (p. 139) this truth in print also demonstrates a transition from the oral world, no doubt present in the background of Sidney’s *Defence*, to the increasingly written, visual world also at play in his text.

Just as “oral effect” and “oral residue” both play a part in Sidney’s *Defence*, it is quite evident that Sidney also regards his work very much as written, and his audience as literate. He believes that no “goose quill” (Duncan-Jones & van Dorsten, 1973b, p. 140) can “blot the honour of an Earl of Leicester,” that no writing may harm him. The writer of the *Commonwealth*, he explains, “counterfeits himself” (p. 130), creates a false image with his “ink-horn” (p. 132), a visual explanation of what the author does. Sidney also calls on his readers to “read the excellent treatise of Sir Thomas More” (p. 133) and to “compare but his words with his libel-makers’s.” As Duncan-Jones and van Dorsten noted, “A space in the manuscript (Pn) here suggests that Sidney intended to copy out the appropriate quotations from *Leicester’s Commonwealth* and *More*” (1973b, p. 212). He intends for his readers literally to look at, read, and compare the texts in the physical space of his *Defence*, suggesting that he does not regard his work solely as a spoken piece of communication. Sidney further reveals his desire to have his piece printed, “imprinted and published” (1973b, p. 141), and is assured that after its printing in London, it will spread far enough to be seen by his enemy, which he otherwise would deliver “to thine hands if I knew thee,” demonstrating his regard for his text as a physical, not spoken, object.

Many Sidney scholars have argued that the *Defence of Leicester* is not his finest or most artistic piece. This may indeed be the case; however, by looking at the undercurrents manifest in the text, the swirling world of the oral, written, and printed word

still very much at play in 16th-century England, one may develop a fuller and richer picture of Sidney's approaches in the *Defence*. He culls, both consciously and unconsciously, from the world of oral memory and rhetoric, as well as from the world of print and visual media to speak to his audience, to defend his uncle's (and his own) lineage. He rhapsodically weaves these elements together to give "the right reward of an evil-tongued schelm" (Duncan-Jones & van Dorsten, 1973b, p. 140) to the author of the libel, speaking and writing to both the "eyes *and* ears" (p. 139, italics mine) of his audience.

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